

ISSN 1753-6421

1.2

JOURNAL OF

ADAPTATION IN FILM & PERFORMANCE



Volume One Number Two

intellect Journals | Theatre & Music

Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance

Volume 1 Number 2 – 2008

Aims and Scope

Adaptation and translation in the form of the conversion of oral, historical or fictional narratives into stage drama have been common practices for centuries. In our own time the processes of cross-generic and cross-cultural transformation continue to be extremely important in theatre as well as in film and other media industries. Adaptation and the related areas of translation and intertextuality continue to have a central place in our culture and profound resonance across our civilizations. As an academic discipline, Adaptation Studies has begun to establish itself in the last few decades as an important area of scholarship and research which – alongside Translation Studies – continues to make significant contributions to our analysis and understanding of a complex and increasingly diverse world culture.

The aim of this journal is to offer a forum for discussion and analysis of adaptation and/or translation in performance and as creative practice in the context of the following media: theatre, film and television, radio and audio, music, dance, opera, gaming, and graphic narratives.

Editorial Board

Gillian Allard – University of Glamorgan, UK
Theodore Billy – St. Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA
Tim Crook – Goldsmiths, University of London, UK
Patrick H. Deer – New York University, USA
Jonathan Dovey – University of the West of England, UK
Terence Hale – University of Hull, UK
Steffen Hantke – Sogang University, Seoul, Republic of Korea
Linda Hutcheon – University of Toronto, Canada
David Johnston – Queen's University Belfast, UK
Suzanne Jill Levine – University of California of Santa Barbara, USA
Graham Ley – University of Exeter, UK
Christopher Marlow – University of Lincoln, UK
Jay McRoy – University of Wisconsin - Parkside, USA
John Milton – University of São Paulo, Brazil
Gene Moore – University of Amsterdam, Netherlands
Laurence Raw – Baskent University, Turkey
Julie Sanders – University of Nottingham, UK
Suzanne Speidel – Sheffield Hallam University, UK
Eckart Voigts-Virchow – Siegen University, Germany
Michael J. Walton – University of Hull, UK
James M. Welsh – Salisbury University, USA

Journal Editors

Richard J. Hand, Department of Drama and Music, Cardiff School of Creative and Cultural Industries, University of Glamorgan, Atrium, 86–88 Adam Street, Cardiff CF24 2FN, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1443 668608
E-mail: rhand@glam.ac.uk

Katja Krebs, Department of Drama: Theatre, Film and Television, Cantocks Close, University of Bristol, Bristol BS8 1UP, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1179 545476
E-mail: K.Krebs@bristol.ac.uk

Assistant Editor

Márta Minier, Department of Drama and Music, Cardiff School of Creative and Cultural Industries, University of Glamorgan, Atrium, 86–88 Adam Street, Cardiff CF24 2FN, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1443 668548
E-mail: mminier@glam.ac.uk

Reviews Editor

Duška Radosavljević, Department of Drama: Theatre, Film and Television, Cantocks Close, University of Bristol, Bristol BS8 1UP, UK
Tel: +44 (0)117 928900
E-mail: drxdr@bristol.ac.uk

Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance is published three times a year by Intellect, The Mill, Parnall Road, Bristol, BS16 3JG, UK. The current subscription rates are £33 (personal) and £210 (institutional). Postage within the UK is free whereas it is £9 within the EU and £12 elsewhere. Advertising enquiries should be addressed to: marketing@intellectbooks.com.

© 2008 Intellect Ltd. Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use or the internal or personal use of specific clients is granted by Intellect Ltd for libraries and other users registered with the Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA) in the UK or the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) Transactional Reporting Service in the USA provided that the base fee is paid directly to the relevant organization.

ISSN 1753-6421

Printed and bound in Great Britain by 4edge Ltd, Hockley. www.4edge.co.uk

Notes for Contributors

Remit

We will consider articles (between 4,000 and 6,000 words) that offer historical, theoretical or practice-based considerations and analysis of adaptation and translation processes and practices in performance in the context of the following: theatre; film; television; dance; music; opera; audio-culture; gaming; graphic narratives.

Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance also features a 'Practitioners' Perspectives' section on processes of adaptations examined from the point-of-view of the making.

Short 'Notes and Comments' contributions (up to 1,000 words) that facilitate debate and exchange will also be considered.

Submission

Manuscripts should be sent to the Editors, Richard Hand and Katja Krebs.

Articles can be considered when submitted as an e-mail attachment or if two hard-copies and a disk (Word 6 compatible; labeled with author's name, title of article and software used) are posted to the editors' address.

Articles should normally not exceed 6,000 words in length and should be accompanied by an abstract (100 – 150 words) and up to six key words on a separate sheet. The name, address, affiliation and author biography (50 – 100 words) should also appear on a separate sheet to ensure anonymity and confidentiality during the peer-review process.

Contributors should follow the Harvard reference system for citations and include a list of works cited at the end of the article. Explanatory footnotes should be kept to a minimum.

Articles accepted become the copyright of the journal unless otherwise specifically agreed.

Illustrations

Illustrations and images are welcome. Generally only black and white is available. Photographs can only be accepted if production-ready, high-resolution electronic images in JPEG, TIFF or PDF format. All illustrations and images should be accompanied by a caption and numbered. Images also need to be sent with a list of images in the order they are supposed to appear in the article. It is the contributor's responsibility to obtain copyright permission to reproduce images.

Referees

The *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* is a peer-reviewed, refereed journal. Strict anonymity is accorded to both authors and referees.

Opinion

The views expressed in the *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* are those of the authors, and do not necessarily coincide with those of the Editors or the Editorial Board.

For further details on submission guidelines please consult the Intellect website: www.intellectbooks.co.uk.

Editorial

Richard Hand and Katja Krebs

Since the publication of the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* in 2007, we have witnessed a spate of translation and adaptation activity in popular culture. In British theatre, amongst a raft of revivals of classic plays and some new writing, there has been Punchdrunk's promenade performance of Edgar Allan Poe's *Masque of the Red Death*; Kneehigh Theatre's cross-media adaptation of *Brief Encounter* performed in a London cinema while also touring North and South America with their adaptations of *Rapunzel* and *Cymbeline*; Patrick Barlow's 2006 play *39 Steps* based on John Buchan via Alfred Hitchcock has continued its successful run in London with a national tour and transfer to Broadway; whereas, in reciprocation, the musical *Hairspray* – adapted from John Water's 1988 film – has enjoyed popular and critical success after transferring to the West End from Broadway as well as onto the screen with Adam Shankman's film version.

In cinema as a whole, adaptation continues to proliferate. The most popular yardstick of cinematic 'quality', the 2008 Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Awards – the 'Oscars' – were particularly revealing. Winning films produced in 2007 included *No Country for Old Men* (Ethan and Joel Coen) adapted from Cormac McCarthy (in an admittedly rare venture into adaptation by the Coen brothers); *There Will Be Blood* (Paul Thomas Anderson) adapted from Upton Sinclair; *Atonement* (Joe Wright) adapted from Ian McEwan; *The Golden Compass* (Chris Weitz) adapted from Philip Pullman; *Sweeney Todd* (Tim Burton) adapted from Stephen Sondheim, who drew the story from a London urban legend and a rash of nineteenth-century melodramas; *Peter and the Wolf* (Suzie Templeton) adapted from Sergei Prokofiev; and two adaptations of famous women's lives in *La Vie en Rose* (Olivier Dahan) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (Shekhar Kapur). Were it not for the current popularity of cookery programmes, the list may have included *Persepolis* (Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud), adapted from Satrapi's award winning graphic novel of the same title, which was nominated alongside the eventual winner *Ratatouille* in the 'animated feature film' category. In fact, it is probably the splitting of screenplay recognition into two categories (Best Original Screenplay and Best Adapted Screenplay) that safeguarded the almost token presence of an 'original work' in the Oscar winners: *Juno* (Jason Reitman).

In addition, translation appears in an ever more urgent political context where issues of cultural mediation in conflict are not to be found on the periphery but central to global developments. Considering the articles submitted to this journal and discussions in an even wider forum, the debates

surrounding translation and adaptation are still very much concerned with notions of fidelity and accuracy. For example, *The Guardian's* announcement of Steven Spielberg's planned 3D trilogy of Hergé's *Tintin* appeared under the heading: 'Tintinophiles will demand fidelity to Hergé's art' (Lezard, 28 February 2008). This may be symptomatic of fan culture's reaction to and popular notions of adaptation and translation rather than academic discourse, where fidelity has been convincingly discredited as a 'morally loaded discourse [...] [which] should not frame any theorizing of adaptation today' (Hutcheon 2006: 7). However, this myth of privilege of source texts and cultures has a surprising hold over scholarly debates relating to adaptation. Rather than dismissing morality as a premise for analysis, a closer examination of why the notion of fidelity is such a widespread and popular perspective by which to assess adaptation practices seems necessary. At this point, turning toward translation studies may be particularly useful in order to develop further an understanding of fidelity and a position which is not dominated by a prescriptive approach that puts the source and target texts, or even the source and target cultures, in a hierarchical relation with each other. In her seminal work *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account* (2006), Mona Baker turns to Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm (Baker 2006: 141–163) in order to conceptualize the principle of fidelity as based upon 'transcendent values' that necessarily lead to an assessment of narratives, whether in the form of translation or indeed adaptation, which 'itself expresses values and is inevitably subjective' (Baker 2006: 154). Where Baker embraces a narrative paradigm which privileges values in the context of translation (2006: 163), others may not agree and it is certainly not appropriate to apply the same argument wholesale to adaptation studies. What is important, however, is a rigorous engagement with those conceptual frameworks used to assess and analyse adaptations and translations instead of merely dismissing or readily accepting them. The *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* encourages such a renewed and necessary engagement with these contentious points in the hope of moving adaptation studies beyond the descriptive case study which privileges the source, and towards an analysis of the discourses relied upon in theories of adaptation.

This second issue of the *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* provides an eclectic collection of articles which investigate both adaptation and translation practices in a variety of media and contexts, ranging from discussions relating to mainstream popular texts such as *300* (2006), *Troy* (2004), the *Superman* phenomenon and versions of *The Producers* to Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985) and Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Yet the journal is acutely aware of the need to be wary of any such polarization: to take the territory of one of our contributors as an example, classical accounts of the battle of Thermopylae have, in our own time, been adapted by Frank Miller into the graphic novel *300* (1998) which begets Zach Snyder's film which has since begat the spectacle of King Leonidas killing Britney Spears in *Meet the Spartans* (Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer, 2008). Such an adaptive journey may be 'mainstream', 'popular' and aimed ostensibly at Hollywood's paradigmatic spectator, the American teenager, but it also produces work which is inventive, disrespectful, absurd and eclectic. Rather than fixate on value-judgement, we need, as Julie Sanders comments,

'to restore to the subgenres or practices of adaptation and appropriation a genuinely celebratory comprehension of their capacity for creativity, and for comment and critique' (Sanders 2006: 160). Furthermore, as John Storey suggests with regard to the rift between so-called popular and high culture: '[we should not examine] the distinction at the level of textuality but how the distinction is maintained and deployed in institutional strategies of power' (Storey 2003: 106). The *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* is keen to be at the heart of both such celebrations and interrogations. It is also in the spirit of this that the authors of the articles published here include emerging as well as established researchers in an attempt to ensure the egalitarian and inclusive nature of the journal, not only in relation to the breadth of investigation and exploration of translation and adaptation in film and performance in its widest sense, but also with regard to the academic community.

Finally, we would like to pay our respects to Anthony Minghella whose unexpected and untimely death has shocked and saddened us all. We were looking forward to welcoming him at the 'Cultures of Translation: Adaptation in Film and Performance' conference in Cardiff, June 2008, as a keynote speaker in his role of fellow scholar as well as practitioner. Minghella studied and taught at the Drama Department of the University of Hull before setting out to become one of the most respected adaptation practitioners in recent cinema, working in the dual role of screenwriter and director on a clutch of ambitious and acclaimed film releases, namely *The English Patient* (1996), adapted from Michael Ondaatje's 1992 novel; *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), based on Patricia Highsmith's 1955 novel; and *Cold Mountain* (2003), an adaptation of Charles Frazier's 1997 novel. His final project as director and screenwriter was the first episode of *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* (2008), produced for British television and based on Alexander McCall Smith's 1998 novel. Anthony Minghella was also a film producer, an opera director and a television and theatre writer of no small achievement. He had even recently taken an acting role, albeit modest, with a cameo appearance in *Atonement*, the adaptation of Ian McEwan's 2001 novel.

Works cited

- Baker, Mona (2006), *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Hutcheon, Linda (2006), *A Theory of Adaptation*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Lezard, Nicholas (2008), 'Tintinophiles Will Demand Fidelity to Hergé's Art', *The Guardian*, 28 February.
- Sanders, Julie (2006), *Adaptation and Appropriation*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Storey, John (2003), *Inventing Popular Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Cultures of Translation: Adaptation in Film and Performance

26 June 2008 – 28 June 2008

ATRIUM, University of Glamorgan, Cardiff

This international and interdisciplinary conference focuses on various aspects of adaptation into film, performance, television, radio and other media.

Adaptation – the reworking of a verbal text or another artefact for a new audience in a different genre or media – is as old a practice as cultural production itself, yet its systematic study – adaptation studies – is only a recently emerging discipline. The Cardiff School of Creative and Cultural Industries with its strengths in drama, music, media and communication and having strong links with the creative writing unit of the university is the editorial home of *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* and is now hosting a major international and interdisciplinary conference that will shape the formation of this neglected field of research.

The event is open to scholars from as diverse, yet closely interconnected areas as the study of film, theatre, opera, music, dance, television, radio, games and graphic narratives. Whereas some of the most recent research in the field focused on the connections between adaptation and appropriation, this conference also addresses analogies and differences between adaptation and translation processes.

The conference embraces a plethora of perspectives characteristic of the encompassed disciplines and facilitates a negotiation between these stances, whether they emphasize the creative or the interpretive aspect of translation and adaptation. Both the concepts and independent cases of adaptation and translation will receive attention. The event will provide room for the investigation of transformative strategies both against the respective cultural and historical settings and generic or media-based criteria.

The conference therefore offers a range of platforms to participants, including plenaries, papers, workshops, masterclasses, exhibitions, screenings and performances so as to initiate dialogue between theoretical and more practice-based approaches to adaptation and translation.

Keynote speakers:

Jack Bradley (Literary Consultant; former Literary Manager, National Theatre, London)

Dr Deborah Cartmell (De Montfort University)

Professor Michael Cronin (Dublin City University)

Professor Steffen Hantke (Sogang University, Seoul, Republic of Korea)

Professor Graham Ley (University of Exeter)

Dr John Milton, (Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil)

Professor Jonathan Powell (Royal Holloway; former Head of Drama, BBC)

Professor Eckart Voigts-Virchow (University of Siegen, Germany)

The conference is organized by Professor Richard Hand (University of Glamorgan), Dr Katja Krebs (University of Bristol) and Dr Márta Minier (University of Glamorgan).

Contact: mminier@glam.ac.uk; afp2008@hotmail.co.uk.

‘Are There Any More at Home Like You?’: Rewiring *Superman*

Richard Berger *Bournemouth University*

Abstract

Increasingly in contemporary media practice, texts are deployed across a range of different platforms, often simultaneously. Many theorists assume that these platforms are distinct forms, whereas theories of remediation and heteroglossia suggest more fluidity and exchange between literature, theatre, cinema, radio, television and videogames. This article examines the adaptation of the comic book character, Superman, and traces the origins of the Superman comic book narratives into their current transmedia state. Such adaptations can alter the status and authority of pre-existing versions of a text. In Superman's case, an adaptation can eventually become canonical and act as a source text, 'rewiring' previous versions into a dialogical sphere of influence. In addition, some canonical texts can undergo a process of disconnection and can be discounted entirely. This article proposes an approach that is medium non-specific, but one that is text specific when examining the complex rewirings between parallel versions of a text.

Keywords

adaptation
heteroglossia
remediation
rewiring
transmedia
videogame

On 10 December 1978, *Superman the Movie* (Donner) was released in cinemas. It was then the most eagerly anticipated comic book adaptation to date and would both set the precedent for future comic book adaptations and mark the 'maturing' of comic books as a medium, making the form more critically acceptable and opening it up to more academic scrutiny. In addition, this period marked the genesis of the 'transmedia' event – whereby a narrative is deployed across several media, simultaneously.

In this article, I aim to revisit the origins of the transmedia event, and will suggest that adaptation in transmedia can alter the authority and status of pre-existing versions of a text. As Sarah Cardwell points out, adaptations can build upon other adaptations, but this process can also privilege some versions over others (Cardwell 2002: 14). Joy Gould Boyum highlights this evolutionary approach to adaptation by suggesting that '[film] might even be considered a natural next step in literature's evolution' (1985: 20). Cardwell further proposes a media specific approach, but I will argue here that adaptation can often span different media platforms. In such instances, a 'target' text can itself become 'source', as some medium specific approaches recognize. However, in transmedia an adaptation can become canonical, and eventually the central text. In transmedia, these central texts can serve to connect to and disconnect from a range of other versions – I will use the term 'rewire' here in this context. Another condition of this process is that previously framed canonical texts can 'drop out' of this dialogical sphere of influence.

Adaptation theorists such as Brian McFarlane (1996) and Sarah Cardwell (2002) have done much to move such studies beyond those confined to limited methodologies of fidelity. However, others recognize that comparative positions still have value:

If we know the prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly. When we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works.

(Hutcheon 2006: 6)

Sanders further argues that '[e]ncouraged interplay between appropriations and their sources begins to emerge, then, as a fundamental, even vital, aspect of the reading or spectating experience' (2006: 32). Both Linda Hutcheon and Julie Sanders claim that an adaptation needs to resonate with its source material, if it is to be experienced as an adaptation. However, in transmedia, texts are constantly undergoing a process of rewiring that can temporarily privilege or 'frame' one text over another.

Superman's seventy-year history shows us that the comic books were the central texts in the 1930s and 1940s, followed by the 1950s George Reeves television serials, before the late 1970s and 1980s Christopher Reeve films rewired the entire *Superman* canon. Briefly the *Lois and Clark* television series of the 1990s was framed as the central text, but the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (Wolfman, Pérez et al 2001) and *The Man of Steel* (1986) comic book series 'rebooted' the entire mythos again, framing a range of sources, as further extended by *Superman Returns* (Singer 2006).

I will argue here that adaptation in transmedia often depends on this dialogue or oscillation with other texts – as Hutcheon (2006) and Sanders (2006) both recognize. However, medium specific approaches appear to be too narrow in this context. A study of *Superman* will allow us to look back at the seventy-year genesis of this transmedia dialogue. The approach I am proposing here is medium non-specific; it is *text* specific.

Traditionally, adaptation studies have predominantly favoured one text (the source) over another (the target). The fidelity approach usually privileges the novel over the film. Medium-based prejudice is therefore often present in such comparative positions. Consequently, until the 1980s, comic books had largely been ignored by theorists, except as scapegoats in 'media effects' debates. It would be Fredric Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, which would have the biggest impact on the comic book genre, and *Superman* in general. This study led to the establishment of the Comic Codes Authority in the United States, based on the Film Production Code:

Implementation of the comic code did change the content of comic books and force a reorganization of the industry itself as publishers scrambled to comply with the new regulations.

(Nyberg 1999: 56)

So, by the 1970s, *Superman* had suffered from regulation and conglomeration, and the eponymous lead character was ripe for reinvention. Up until this point, comic book adaptations had met with varying critical and commercial success. Most adaptations were spin-offs based on the comic books

as source material, but doing little that would innovate the genre as a whole. *Superman the Movie* would reinvigorate the world's oldest superhero, and rewrite the character for later comic books and adaptations, imposing its own new rules on the *Superman* universe. In short, *Superman the Movie* marked a new stage in the relationship between the comic book and other visual media, which had begun with the George Reeves *Superman* television series in the 1950s. The 1978 movie was not the 'end product' of a lineage of *Superman* adaptations, but the beginnings of a dialogical, evolutionary and more instantaneous type of translation which encompassed the 'linear textual history of adaptation available to each new adaptor' (Cardwell 2002: 24).

From the 1980s *Superman's* mythos embraced not just cinema and television, but also emerging media such as videogames and the VCR. In addition, these texts were 'heteroglossic' in that they contained all the elements or 'utterances' of previous versions and variants of *Superman*, and these utterances influenced each other dialogically: 'There is no utterance without relation to other utterances' (Todorov 1984: 60).

The terms 'heteroglossia' and 'dialogism' used here are borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin (1994), who employed them to describe the 'many language'd nature of literature. He argued that literature was just one of many languages, and that no one voice, including the author's own, dominated the novel. Bakhtin called this a 'plurality of consciousness', 'multi-leveledness and multi-voicedness' (1994: 88, 90), whereby the authorial consciousness interacts with that of the heroes/protagonists dialogically as autonomous subjects. Robert Stam further suggests that the mass media itself has now become an 'ambient heteroglossia' (Stam 1989: 220). Adaptation theorists such as James Naremore (2000) and Hutcheon have noted that some adaptations are ostensibly heteroglossic, and that such a position is useful:

For the reader, spectator, or listener, adaptation as *adaptation* is [...] an ongoing dialogical process, as Mikhail Bakhtin would have said, in which we compare the work we already know, with the one we are experiencing.

(Hutcheon 2006: 21)

Texts oscillating and rewiring each other in transmedia adaptation, I would argue, could be both source and target at different moments. This standpoint fractures the linear binary relationship between source and target texts. Comic books are thus seen here as an overtly heteroglossic form. Comic books and videogames are often overlooked by adaptation theorists, but they are now essential utterances in any transmedia process. If adaptations are truly heteroglossic, it must be because of the heteroglossic potential of all media. Heteroglossia, then, suggests a condition that is far more plural than fidelity-centred comparative positions suggest, as all visual media remediate each other, and is further extended during the shift from analogue to digital acquisition and exhibition technologies.

Adaptation and translation often raise questions of fidelity. The main problem with this comparative position, however, is the assumption that there is a single source text and a beneficiary target. Comic book adaptation therefore poses particular challenges to the adaptation theorist, as most

1. Batman, created by Bob Kane, began later in 1939, but he was mortal, and not possessed of superhuman or supernatural powers. *Superman* is a far more formalist text than *Batman* and has always been dialogically linked with an array of source material.

comic book narratives have no secure and permanent source text. In *Superman's* case, by 1978 the narrative did not only span several decades of comic books written and drawn by many artists, but also radio and television and, from the 1980s, videogames.

In essence, the *Superman* films of the 1980s act as an interface that rewires other elements of the *Superman* narrative across a range of different media, which have gained what Walter Benjamin (1999) calls an 'afterlife' through their many versions and translations: '[Superman's] influence spread throughout all known media as he became a star of animated cartoons, radio recordings, books, motion pictures and television' (Daniels 2004: 11).

The *Superman* films are not adaptations in the accepted definition of the term. Rather, they are heteroglossic in that they are 'shot through' with the voices of the many artists, writers and adaptors of the comic books. These films would also remediate the comic books. *Superman's* original format would absorb the innovations of cinema, as *Superman* underwent a process whereby it was fundamentally altered. As Cardwell suggests, adaptations can 're-write, re-view, re-activate and re-configure' their source material (2002: 205).

With comic book adaptation there is already movement between visual mediums. Any potential audience already has a well-established visual referent: the comic books themselves. Indeed, the aesthetic generated by the 'source' could act as a storyboard for any film and television version. Accordingly, adaptation, particularly comic book adaptation, became increasingly heteroglossic from the 1980s:

In one sense, every film adaptation can be understood as a type of intertextuality or pastiche, if only because the very process of adaptation involves the deliberate imitation of a prior work.

(Sadler 2000: 192)

Naremore argues similarly:

In addition to expanding the kinds of texts we take into account, we need to augment the metaphors of translation and performance with the metaphor of intertextuality, or with what M.M. Bakhtin called 'dialogics'.

(Naremore 2000: 12)

Superman the Movie in 1978 would not be just a spin-off as so many comic book adaptations had been, but it would serve to rewrite the entire *Superman* mythos, and become a temporary source text for a whole host of *Superman* adaptations that would follow. *Superman* has always been adapted into other media since its origins, but this strategy would peak in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as Hollywood production shifted towards the blockbuster.

Towards transmedia

Superman, first conceived in January 1933, was the first superhero.¹ Superman was first portrayed as a villain named Bill Dunn, who was later revisioned into a 'good guy' for more popular appeal. The two creators,

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, originally produced *Superman* as a syndicated newspaper strip, which eventually ran from 16 January 1939 until May 1966, before being revived between 1977 and 1983: 'It was the newspaper strip that began Superman's existence as a franchise' (Daniels 2004: 41).

However, the Man of Steel really came of age with the emergence of comic books from the early 1930s onwards. These books were essentially lengthier spin-offs of the newspaper strips, which often contained many weeks' worth of already published stories, and, later, completely original adventures. So, *Superman* appeared at a time when the comic strip was making its first move into another medium:

The comic strip is a gregarious creature. It is unhappy on its own: it needs the company of other editorial matter to look its best. Since it is hard, too, for any one strip to satisfy all tastes, a single strip will rarely flourish. In a group, however, comic strips have all the variety, experience and interest of a roomful of assorted people.

(Perry and Aldridge 1971: 241)

By the summer of 1939, Superman had his own dedicated comic book, followed by a flourishing fan club. Lex Luthor was also immediately established as Superman's arch nemesis. The first filmed version (1939) was an animation voiced by Ray Middleton. This was quickly followed by a long-running radio series, *The Adventures of Superman*, from 1940, with Clayton 'Bud' Collier voicing the eponymous character. By 1941 Superman was appearing in three comic books (*Action Comics*, *Superman* and *New York World's Fair Comics*) as well as other stories with Batman and Robin in *Detective Comics*. Novelizations of *Superman* had started to appear in 1942, written by George Lowther, as comic books attempted to gain cultural cachet by being translated into a more prestigious form. As John Izod (1993) points out, this can be a common occurrence in instances where there are no literary source texts. By 1945 Lex Luthor was now living permanently in space, and Superboy appeared, but this time in his own television series, played by Don Cameron:

Within a year, the character made a transition to adolescence, and was featured in a series deeply rooted in the idyllic town of Smallville and the home of his foster parents, the Kents.

(Daniels 2004: 69)

By 1946, this spin-off character started appearing in DC's *Superman* comics, and by 1949 he would have a comic book of his own.

In 1948 Kirk Alyn was cast as Superman/Clark Kent in the first film serial adventure, *Superman*. This was followed by *Atom Man vs. Superman* in 1950. From its very inception, *Superman* was deployed across several different media simultaneously, and I would suggest that the continuing appeal of the character owes its success to this transmedia presence. Siegel and Shuster lost all rights to Superman in 1948 – although they continue to be credited as 'creators' in other versions of *Superman* – and the narrative was now so vast that many writers and adaptors were working on elements of it in parallel. Characters such as Perry White, Jimmy Olsen

2. Siegel and Shuster's Superman had originally spent his early years in an orphanage.
3. A Warner Bros. animated television series of *Krypto the Superdog* began in 2005.

and Clark Kent's parents were introduced by other contributors.² The successful George Reeves television series began in 1951, and the actor appeared in character in an episode of *I Love Lucy* in 1956. Jimmy Olsen had his own comic book from September 1954, where he acquired temporary superpowers that allowed him to change into Elastic Lad. This comic book series would run for almost twenty years, and was followed by a comic book dedicated to Lois Lane, from March 1958, which ran for sixteen years.

In the late 1950s and 1960s more television spin-offs were attempted. Pilots for new series were filmed, notably a quickly aborted *The Adventures of Superpup* in 1957, a show about Superman's dog, which would later be revived in the comic books as *Krypto The Superdog*.³ Twelve episodes of *The Adventures of Superboy* were also written in 1961, although only one was ever filmed, starring John Rockwell in the title role, but never broadcast.

The late 1950s and early 1960s in comic book terms 'was the start of the idea of an interlocking universe composed of many comics; rather than offering independent stories that were accessible to the reader' (Daniels 2004: 103). It is here that the many *Superman* adaptations began to have an impact on pre-existing versions of *Superman*, as the comic books began to oscillate with each other, as well as with versions in other media. In short, the comic books were being rewritten to accommodate Superman's transmedia appeal; the establishment of an often contradictory 'multiverse' in the comic books reflected the many different versions of *Superman* that had appeared in books, radio and television over the previous two decades. This illuminates, and perhaps facilitates, the otherwise opaque heteroglossic qualities of the *Superman* narrative, later reflected in the 1978 film. As *Superman* became ever more heteroglossic, the authority and status of some aspects of the *Superman* universe began to alter.

The remediation of *Superman*

In the 1950s and 1960s, the comic books had undergone a process of 'remediation' as the *Superman* narrative merged with other comic book narratives and split into alternate realities.

The 1950s were the start of *Superman's* remediation, as the new technology of television became a mass medium. Not only were Superman's adventures adapted for this new media, but the comic books began to be influenced by the George Reeves series in what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call 'the double logic of remediation' (2000: 3). Although a visual medium, the comic book differed from television and cinema, as each image is spatially juxtaposed on a page: 'Each successive frame of a movie is projected on exactly the same space – the screen – while each frame of comics must occupy a different space. Space does for comics what time does for film' (McCloud 1993: 7).

This posed particular problems for the adaptors of *Superman*, who had to use subtle plot devices to suggest Superman's powers and to utilize unsatisfactory animation. So these 1950s and 1960s adaptations were heteroglossic, because they framed certain utterances of the previous radio and animated adaptations. However, for the first time, the adaptations started to alter the status of the (up until now) fairly secure source material.

The comic books were being decentred as privileged texts as they appropriated the televisual aesthetic of the George Reeves series:

Familiarity with films and television [enabled] the public to accept methods of [comic] strip presentation which would have been incomprehensible at the beginning of the [20th] century. [...] An arsenal of acceptable visual devices [was] available to the cartoonist and their use [...] brought a new freshness to the [comic] strip narrative form.

(Perry and Aldridge 1971: 242)

After *Superman's* success on television, an unsuccessful Broadway musical, *It's a Bird, it's a Plane, it's Superman!* was staged in 1966, as the franchise sought to permeate all existing media forms. The show was written by Robert Benton and David Newman, who would later rewrite Mario Puzo's script for *Superman the Movie*. New animated versions appeared on television in the 1960s, before the producers Alexander and Ilya Salkind reworked three decades worth of storylines, characters and adaptations for the first *Superman* film.

The *Superman* narrative had by this time become the perfect embodiment of the Barthesian 'writerly text' (Barthes 1974: 4) as not only is it open to interpretation by readers and audiences, but by the writers as well – many of whom had grown up with the strip and were self-confessed fans of the franchise, as well as other media genres. Indeed, Will Booker (1999) has highlighted the impact cinema had on comic books from the 1940s onwards.

Superman's origins have been rewritten by contributors throughout his history, suggesting that *Superman* has been a 'revisionist' narrative – constantly revisited and updated – from its early days. This would further decentre Siegel and Shuster's privileged authority, eventually disconnecting their version of *Superman* entirely. This is now a common occurrence in comic books, and writers would later explore other scenarios in alternative and parallel universes: 'From the 60s, stories broke off into "imaginary stories" in which writers would explore alternate realities that might have radically changed, or ended the series' (Daniels 2004: 109).

In addition, *Superman's* nemesis, Lex Luthor, was portrayed as both a mad scientist and a ruthless tycoon. In November 1970, Lois Lane appeared as a black woman and *Superman* himself was killed by Luthor in 1961, and then destroyed in 1986's *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series, a comic book that rewired all the other comic books.⁴ For *Superman*, this revisioning would reach its peak in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, after *Superman the Movie*, *Superman II* (Lester, 1980) and *Superman III* (Lester, 1983). This is perhaps why *Superman* and comic books generally have been so popular with adaptors. *Superman the Movie* would assemble yet another system of influences, and would serve to rework elements of *Superman* into a text that would in turn rewrite the superhero's history (again). *Superman the Movie* would canonize itself by dialogically rewiring a host of sources, as other texts – such as Siegel and Shuster's comic book stories of Clark Kent growing up in an orphanage – were disconnected and discounted from this new sphere of influence. *Superman the Movie* would privilege the comic books of the 1960s and the George Reeves 1950s television serials.

4. Superman would be killed again in January 1993, in *Superman* #75.

The heteroglossia of *Superman*

By the 1970s the *Superman* comic books were in decline. New censorship laws, increasing conglomeration and a misguided drive to modernize Superman had all had a significant impact on the form. By 1971 Clark Kent had been fired from the *Daily Planet* and was now a TV reporter. He wore more modern clothes and had moved away from his 1950s style. Clark was also less clumsy, with the dual identity of the character diminished.

Superman's powers had also been scaled down and neutered, as Kryptonite was eradicated from the world. The Salkinds, however, insisted that they wanted Clark Kent back at the *Daily Planet*, so by 1974 the imminent movie had forced the character back to its roots in the 'Golden Age'. The comic books of the 1980s subsequently followed the film's lead. This change in authority, and a decentring of the comic books, is largely due to an imbalance in the status between cinema and comic books in the 1980s. The latter was still viewed as an inferior form, and cinema was, and perhaps to an extent still is, the dominant of the two mediums.

The film could hardly have been 'unfaithful' to the *Superman* mythos, as that had been rewritten so many times, rendering any medium specific comparative approach fairly limiting. It is interesting to note, however, that the first act of the film is set in Smallville – the domestic space of *Superman* – but the *mise-en-scène* is firmly 1950s, evoking the 'Golden Age' of the comic books and the George Reeves television series. When Clark Kent is an adult he still wears 1950s fashions, complete with Trilby hat, despite living and working in 1980s America. Here the film manages to be both spatially and temporally specific, with the 1950s suit signifying Clark Kent's 'otherness'. The film is therefore attempting to frame a text which is itself completely contradictory and revisionary, forcing the notion of 'source' temporarily onto several elements of the already established *Superman* transmedia universe.

Until now, television and cinema had attempted to bring *Superman* to life, despite technological limitations. Often a mixture of live action and computer animation was used, but in the 1950s and 1960s the juxtaposition of two techniques was disappointing for audiences. The history of media technology is evolutionary, just as that of comic books and adaptation. As Paul Levinson suggests: 'Not only do old media become the content of the new media, but in doing so retain the older media that served as their content, which in turn retain their even older media as content' (Levinson 2001: 41).

Cinema had been revolutionized by special effects in the late 1970s and 1980s. Just three years before *Superman the Movie* was exhibited, Stephen Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) had heralded the era of the blockbuster, quickly followed by George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977). *Superman the Movie* would complete a triptych of texts where recent innovations in visual effects were the star attraction, hence diminishing the need for big stars playing the lead characters. Technology had improved cinema to such an extent that comic book adaptations were now able to render a more believable diegesis. This had also improved the process of adaptation, at a time when newspapers were beginning to use colour in their comic strips.

However, the 1980s *Superman* films would become more than just a branch of the comic books. Sequels followed in 1980 and 1983.

Superman II is notable for the romance between Superman and Lois Lane. Before consummating their relationship Superman gives up his powers, later regaining them to fight his three enemies from the planet Krypton, thereby reinforcing which identity is 'real': 'It is Superman who is the real character, Clark Kent the improbable one' (Perry and Aldridge 1971: 166). The movie was certainly more playful, had more jokes, and despite criticism from devotees, it went on to become the type of success that will only be sated by another version.

Lester also directed *Superman III*. In this film, again starring Christopher Reeve, Superman splits into good and evil sides, and he fights himself. This device further entrenched the oppositional identity, which was foregrounded in the parallel comics' alternative-universe structure. In the third act, Superman is faced by a giant supercomputer – a nod to the emerging home computer boom. As a narrative, *Superman* has always absorbed temporally specific elements of its own culture, privileging contemporary events as source materials; in the 1940s Superman fought the Nazis: 'The G.I.s in action on Omaha Beach carried with them comic books of Superman conquering the Axis in their rucksacks' (Perry and Aldridge 1971: 15). In 1949, a supervillain, Toyman, created a giant computer 'Superbrain' – a direct reference to huge computers such as the United Kingdom's Colossus built in December 1943, and ENIAC built in the United States in 1946.

Superman III reflected a new public awareness of the dawning of the information age. *Superman* had already been adapted by the emerging videogame market in 1979, with Atari's *Superman*. This game was quite simplistic, and did little to impact on *Superman's* diegesis. By the time of *Superman III*, however, the home computer and videogames market had been improved technologically to offer a more dialogic version, *Superman: The Game*. This 1985 videogame replicated much of the kinetic energy of the films, and subsequently remediated *Superman*. Cinema and videogames have both benefited from technological improvements, but the videogame offers the potential to combine all the elements of *Superman* that have gone before, blending the comic book's aesthetic with the moving image of cinema and adding a level of participation that allows the player a supreme moment of temporary adaptation.

Critically, videogames have been treated as a separate and distinct cultural form by writers and theorists, although in recent years many (see Hertz 1997, Poole 2000, Darley 2000, Atkins 2003 and Rehak 2003) have pointed out the similarities between cinema and videogames. These observations were made possible by the technological improvement of both media. In the 1980s, videogames, like comic books, were largely ignored by theorists, but as *Superman: The Game* shows, these texts have been locked in a dialogic parallel with their filmic source texts from the start.

Many videogames are 'based' on films, although very often they are released simultaneously with the exhibition of the supposed source text, providing a great deal of marketing cachet. From the 1980s, videogames were starting to be created by the same companies or corporations that also produced the films, as the heteroglossic nature of *Superman* embraced the economies of scale. The cinema-to-videogame trajectory has mirrored the comic book-to-film trajectory; however, the increasingly fluid relationship

5. This was *Super Mario Brothers* (Morton, 1993).

of exchange facilitated by technology would eventually lead to an inevitable videogame-to-cinema trajectory.

Cinema's appropriation and adaptation of pre-existing popular genres and texts – such as the 'western' *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter 1903) – was mirrored by early videogames' adaptation of cinematic science-fiction and televisual sports. In the 1980s, as videogames began to rapidly permeate popular culture, the superhero genre was perfect source material, and the increasingly fluid and heteroglossic *Superman* narrative extended its transmedia appeal.

It would be a decade before the first movie adaptation of a videogame,⁵ but the videogames of the early 1980s were quick to adapt and remediate cinema. The first steps towards this were videogames featuring characters. *Superman: The Game* was one of the earliest videogames explicitly based on a film as source text, and subsequently videogames were starting to have an impact on cinema:

Videogames *remediate* cinema; that is they demonstrate the propensity of emerging media forms to pattern themselves on the characteristic behaviours and tendencies of their predecessors.

(Rehak 2003: 104)

Superman: The Game was the start of this process, and marked a significant stage in comic book, movie and videogame history, as these three media were now engaging in a more dynamic dialogue; a dialogue that would in future create new heteroglossic texts. Videogames were emerging as no longer just another comic book or film spin-off, but were now starting to be forged in a more dialogic parallel with those media. So, these three distinct forms were now sharing the same dialogical symbolic exchange: 'If movies are supposed to generate a willing suspension of disbelief, cinematic conventions in an explanatory adventure game do exactly the opposite. They make everything seem like a set' (Hertz 1997: 154–155).

Rewiring *Superman*

Superman III had not been as successful as its two predecessors, and this was further illuminated by *Superman Returns* (Singer 2006) which would ignore it altogether, preferring to dialogically link with *Superman the Movie* and to broadly follow on from *Superman II*. *Superman Returns* therefore would affect the authority of pre-existing versions, just as *Superman the Movie* had done in 1978. Some texts, such as the first movie and its sequel, were privileged over others, whereas other texts, such as *Superman III* and *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (Furie 1987), would be decentred, and would lose status and authority in the *Superman* canon. This canon now encompassed an array of content dispersed across many different platforms, but not all were dialogically engaged with other elements of the *Superman* narrative.

A year before *Superman: The Game*, the film *Supergirl* (Szwarc 1984) was released. The Salkinds again had tried to replicate the formula for *Superman the Movie*; a relative unknown was cast as the eponymous character (Helen Slater) and she was surrounded by an all-star cast – just as

Christopher Reeve had been – which included Faye Dunaway, Mia Farrow, Peter O'Toole and Peter Cook. Supergirl/Kara was another refugee from Superman's home planet, Krypton. In a moment of astute intertextuality – and perhaps an attempt at fidelity – she has a 'pin-up' picture of Christopher Reeve's Superman on her bedroom wall. The film was a critical and commercial disaster, ending the Salkinds' association with the franchise until the 1988 *Superboy* television series. As a text, *Supergirl* had little impact on the overall *Superman* narrative.

By 1985 Superman's transmedia appeal was waning, as those texts not rewire by the Christopher Reeve films began to disconnect from the sphere of influence:

Before long, though, countless contradictions popped up in stories as young writers (many of whom were fans and even scholars of the old comics) tried to hold together so much accumulated love. The D.C. Universe became so top heavy that it threatened to topple.

(Daniels 2004: 148)

There were now dozens of different comic books written by different contributors and artists, exploring different storylines in a range of parallel universes. There were new adventures with Batman and Robin, and the Justice League of America. Superman even fought Spiderman in a collaboration between rival comic producers DC and Marvel. Television was now home to regular animated adaptations, and the new medium of VCR had technologically improved television and given the *Superman* films an 'after-life' on video, thereby markedly extending the films' longevity in popular culture and their influence on any versions of *Superman* that would follow.

So, to revitalize the franchise, DC commissioned a comic book series that would rewrite and reconfigure the *Superman* mythos. In doing so, this series further framed privileged elements of the narrative in their pre-existing state, dialogically rewiring the *Superman* heteroglossia. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was a twelve edition comic book series that ran from April 1985 to March 1986. This series introduced a cataclysmic event that effectively wiped out those elements of the past that a new generation of *Superman* writers, such as Alan Moore, wanted to jettison. A 'time-warp' device was employed to allow the DC stable of comic book superheroes to begin again.

Supergirl was killed off in *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #7, and would never return. The series ended with Superman living a mortal life, married to Lois Lane, and no longer burdened by his powers. Essentially Superman had died, leaving Clark Kent behind. The ensuing time-warp device allowed the comic books to start again from scratch. Superboy's history was privileged and reworked into Superman's mythology. It became the adventures of an adolescent Superman/Clark Kent, set in Smallville. Superboy had been disconnected and the character 'dropped out' of the *Superman* canon altogether. Superman/Clark Kent's origins were again revisited, and the new Superman was now younger, and Clark Kent was less awkward and more streetwise. In addition, Lois Lane was now a feminist, similar to Margot Kidder's portrayal in the 1978 movie version, and Lex Luthor was no longer a scientist, but a business tycoon. New comic book artist, John Byrne, drew heavily on the Christopher Reeve films for

inspiration: 'This mid-1980s incarnation looked like Reeve and was more "human" than ever before' (Sabin 1996: 172).

The *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and the later *The Man of Steel* comic books had framed the Christopher Reeve movie adaptations as a central text in Superman's transmedia narrative. These films have been the inspiration for subsequent versions of *Superman*. Christopher Reeve reprised the role for the final time in *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*. This film dealt with the Cold War and the Nuclear Arms Race and also featured Superman being cloned, again adding to the character's almost permanent identity crisis.

Superman IV: The Quest for Peace would be the final *Superman* film, until *Superman Returns* in 2006. The 1980s would see a boom in comic book adaptation, as the genre fully embraced cinema, and the cinema embraced comic books, as McCloud writes: 'In comic at its best, words and pictures are like partners in a dance and each one takes turns in leading' (1993: 156). In the 1980s and 1990s, the 'dance' now included videogames, spin-off comics based on the film adaptations and new animated television series as the comic book genre fully realized its heteroglossic potential.

A text becomes canonical by virtue of its continuing adaptation and translation. Several elements of the *Superman* mythos that the 1978 movie rewrote had now become a fixed part of that mythos. Before the 1978 movie, Superman's earthbound home, the Fortress of Solitude, was a giant zoo that contained artefacts from Krypton. As Umberto Eco notes:

For Superman the fortress is a museum of memories: everything that has happened in his adventurous life is recorded here in perfect copies, or preserved in a miniaturized form of the original.

(1998: 4–5)

This view could also stand as a metaphor for *Superman the Movie*, which accesses and reworks all elements of the *Superman* narrative, including previous adaptations and versions. The 1978 movie's depiction of an austere Arctic dwelling would be followed by all other *Superman* adaptations thereafter.

Television was also influenced by the 1980s *Superman* films, as well as the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and *The Man of Steel* comic books. In the *Lois and Clark* (1993–97) television series, Teri Hatcher's Lois Lane was a return to Margot Kidder's version and the one appropriated by *The Man of Steel* comics. This series also featured Lex Luthor in his tycoon role, and explored the romantic element of Lois and Clark's relationship, as had *Superman II* and *Crisis on Infinite Earths*.

Smallville (2001–present) went further and adapted the *Superboy* narrative, rewritten by *The Man of Steel* comics as Clark's teenage years. This television series also cast *Superman III*'s Lana Lang – actor Annette O'Toole – as Clark's mother, Martha Kent, and would also feature Christopher Reeve as scientist Virgil Swann, and Margot Kidder as journalist Bridgette Crosby. In season two of the series, Clark travels back to 1950s Smallville to meet his grandfather, referencing temporally both the 1980s films and the 1950s George Reeves television series. Terence Stamp (General Zod in the first two *Superman* films) would provide the disembodied voice of Superman's natural father, Jor-El. Characters added to the *Superman*

mythos in the late 1940s and cemented in the 1980s movies would also appear, such as Perry White, editor of the *Daily Planet*. By now, John Williams' score for the 1978 movie had become canonical and would echo in other versions of *Superman*, particularly in *Smallville* and later in the 2006 *Superman Returns*.

Superman's return to cinema in 2006 further centred the first two Christopher Reeve films as canonical texts, as well as *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and *The Man of Steel* comic books.⁶ Bryan Singer, who directed the first two *X-Men* comic book adaptations (2000, 2003), followed the Salkind blueprint again; casting an unknown, Brandon Routh, as the lead and surrounding him with stars such as Kevin Spacey's Lex Luthor. This version used archive footage of Marlon Brando from the 1978 *Superman the Movie* and provided a sequel of sorts to *Superman II*, thereby completing the rewiring of the *Superman* narrative begun by *Crisis on Infinite Earths* twenty years earlier.

The success and longevity of a comic book character depends on it being rewritten by new comic book artists, and then by cinema, radio, television and videogames. There is something inherent in a successful comic book series that demands translation, displayed by *Superman's* almost immediate appropriation by other media from 1939 onwards. In the wake of the 2006 *Superman Returns* movie, new versions of the 1980s films were re-released on DVD.

Legacy

The comic books had been successfully remediated by the 1980s films, and Superman had come full circle, having been reconfigured and rewritten in a broad range of adaptations and spin-offs, later rectified in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, and developed in Byrne's *The Man of Steel* from June 1986. Superman was now an assemblage of utterances, many of which are connected to the 1980s Christopher Reeve movies. For Derrida, assemblage is a term that

[s]eems more apt for suggesting that the kind of bringing together proposed here has the structure of an interlacing, a weaving, or a web, which would allow the different threads and different lines of sense or force to separate again, as well as being ready to bind others together.

(Derrida 1978: 131)

This 'separation' and 'interlacing' – which I have called here 'rewiring' – have always been bound up in the process of adaptation, but the increasing heteroglossic nature of mass media, which is now reflected in their adaptations, make these rewirings far more explicit.

As *Superman* became heteroglossic, the status and authority of pre-existing versions altered with each new attempt to realize the character and his world in another form. This medium non-specific approach allows us to examine these complex rewirings as adaptation becomes an evolutionary process that prioritizes some texts over others, increasingly in another medium altogether. In transmedia, the differences between 'source' and 'target' become blurred to an extent where such terms no longer have currency. The transmedia, or 'cross-platform' nature of contemporary media,

6. Bryan Singer's follow-up to *Superman Returns*, released in 2009, is titled *Superman: Man of Steel*.

can best be understood by examining adaptation. Adaptation reveals the connections between texts, and therefore the connections between different media. The approach I have proposed and followed here views comic book and videogame appropriation as plural elements of a 'heteroglot' assemblage.

Works cited

- Atkins, Barry (2003), *More Than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1994), 'Dostoevsky's Polyphonic Novel: A Plurality of Consciousnesses' (trans. Caryl Emerson), in Pam Morris (ed.), *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, London: Arnold, 88–96.
- Barthes, Roland (1974), *S/Z* (trans. Richard Miller), Oxford: Blackwell.
- Benjamin, Walter (1999), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (trans. Harry Zohn), London: Pimlico Press.
- Bolter, Jay David and Grusin, Richard (2000), *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Booker, Will (1999), 'Batman: One Life, Many Faces', in Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (eds), *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, London: Routledge, 185–198.
- Boyum, Joy Gould (1985), *Double Exposure: Fiction into Film*, New York: Plume Books.
- Byrne, John and Giordano, Dick (1986), *The Man of Steel* (6 issues), New York: DC Comics.
- Cardwell, Sarah (2002), *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Daniels, Les (2004), *Superman: The Complete History*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Darley, Andrew (2000), *Visual Digital Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Derrida, Jacques (1978), *Writing and Difference* (trans. Alan Bass), London: Routledge.
- Eco, Umberto (1998), *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality* (trans. William Weaver), London: Vintage.
- Hertz, J. C. (1997), *Joystick Nation: How Videogames Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts and Rewired Our Minds*, Boston: Little Brown & Co.
- Hutcheon, Linda (2006), *A Theory of Adaptation*, London: Routledge.
- Izod, John (1993), 'Words Selling Pictures', in John Orr and Colin Nicholson (eds), *Cinema and Fiction: New Modes of Adapting, 1950–1990*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 95–103.
- Levinson, Paul (2001), *Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium*, London: Routledge.
- McCloud, Scott (1993), *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, New York: Harper Collins.
- McFarlane, Brian (1996), *Novel into Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Naremore, James (2000), 'Introduction: Film and the Reign of Adaptation', in James Naremore (ed.), *Film Adaptation*, London: Athlone Press, 1–18.
- Nyberg, Amy Kiste (1999), 'Comic Book Censorship in the United States', in John A. Lent (ed.), *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign*, London: Associated University Presses, 42–68.

- Perry, George and Aldridge, Alan (1971), *The Penguin Book of Comics*, Middlesex: Penguin.
- Poole, Steven (2000), *Trigger Happy: The Secret Life of Videogames*, London: Fourth Estate.
- Rehak, Bob (2003), 'Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar', in Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (eds), *The Video Game Theory Reader*, London: Routledge, 103–128.
- Sabin, Roger (1996), *Comix, Comics and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*, London: Phaidon.
- Sadlier, Darlene J. (2000), 'The Politics of Adaptation: *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*', in James Naremore (ed.), *Film Adaptation*, London: The Athlone Press, 190–205.
- Sanders, Julie (2006), *Adaptation and Appropriation*, London: Routledge.
- Stam, Robert (1989), *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Todorov, Tzvetan (1984), *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Wertham, Fredric (1954), *Seduction of the Innocent*, New York: Rinehart.
- Wolfman, Marv, Pérez, George et al (2001), *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, London: Titan Books (originally published in single magazine form by DC Comics, January–December 1985, in 12 issues).

Suggested citation

Berger, R. (2008), 'Are There Any More at Home Like You?': Rewiring *Superman*', *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 1: 2, pp. 87–101, doi: 10.1386/jafp.1.2.87/1

Contributor details

Dr Richard Berger is a Reader in the Pedagogy of Media at The Media School, Bournemouth University. His research interests include adaptation, particularly comic book and videogame adaptation. He is currently researching blogging, fanfic and other forms of personal expression online.

Contact: Media School, Bournemouth University, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Poole, Dorset, BH12 5BB, UK.
E-mail: rberger@bournemouth.ac.uk

Mediation and Conflict: Translation and Culture in a Global Context

Call for Papers (General Conference and Special Panels)

Melbourne

Wednesday 8 July – Friday 10 July 2009

Welcome

We are inviting proposals for papers for the 2009 IATIS Conference. The deadline is Wednesday, 17 September 2008.

You may submit an abstract either to the general conference (IATIS.Abstacts@arts.monash.edu.au <mailto:IATIS.Abstacts@arts.monash.edu.au>) or to an individual panel through its chair. A general outline of the themes of the conference appears below, followed by a list of the Special Panels that will be held.

The official language of the conference is English. Intending participants should submit a 300-word abstract of their proposed paper (20 minutes presentation, plus 10 minutes discussion time). [Click here](#) to download an abstract submission form.

The theme of the conference is: 'Mediation and Conflict: Translation and Culture in a Global Context'. This embraces such topics as globalisation and localisation, cultural translation, intercultural relations and transnational media. Related thematic areas include, but are not limited to, the following:

- the role of translation in the reporting of conflict across linguistic and cultural divides;
- 'cultural translation' between mainlands and diasporas, as well as among diasporas;
- the translator / interpreter as cultural broker in a transnational world;
- intercultural relations and their political impact, including the need for 'translating' between old and new;
- the role of literary translation in challenging or reinforcing cultural difference;
- covert censorship – mediated manipulations and the role of the translator / interpreter;
- policy and practice;
- issues in signed languages interpreting and translation;
- high culture and popular culture as sites of contest or mediation;
- transnational media and their role in facilitating, or discouraging, intercultural understanding;
- new media in translation;
- gender, sexuality and norms in intercultural studies;
- transnational and regional identities and their relationship to culture and processes of translation;
- intercultural mediation, including community interpreting and translation;
- political and ideological dimensions of translation.

In addition, a number of Special Panels have been proposed. If you would like to propose a paper that fits in with one of the panels, you should submit your abstract directly to the chair of that panel.

Ran: Chaos on the 'Western' Frontier

Yvonne Griggs *De Montfort University*

Abstract

This article looks at the relationship between Akira Kurosawa's Ran, Shakespeare's King Lear and genre cinema. Instead of seeking to prove Ran's debt to Shakespeare, debate centres on Kurosawa's inventive intertextualization, part of which involves his manipulation of the generic codes of Eastern and Western cinema. The article argues that – although widely regarded as part of the 'canon' of Shakespeare on screen and appropriated by a Shakespearean heritage of global proportions – Kurosawa's Ran refuses to be consumed by Western academia. The film offers a social critique of patriarchal systems across a range of genres, from Japanese jidai-geki epic to Renaissance tragedy, to Hollywood western, linking the concerns embedded in Shakespeare's King Lear with those of other historical eras, other nations, other mythologies.

Keywords

Ran
King Lear
screen adaptation
intertext
genre cinema

Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985) has been legitimized by Western scholarship; its place within the canon of Shakespeare on screen is secure.¹ However, critical debate surrounding the film is driven by a desire to prove the 'unquestionable' parallels between *Ran* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, leading to a disturbing diminishment of not only the cultural and the aesthetic worth of the film but to a negation of its intertextual strengths. Furthermore, from the perspective of Shakespearean scholarship, existing discussion omits consideration of the film as a highly successful work of genre cinema. Kurosawa melds the literature of East and West, the film genres of the *jidai-geki* epic and the mainstream western, the cultural and stylistic motifs of Japanese cinema and theatre with the codes and conventions of Hollywood, to create a film which continues to connect with a global film audience. Instead of seeking to prove *Ran's* debt to Shakespeare, debate should centre on Kurosawa's inventive intertextualization, part of which involves his manipulation of the generic codes of Eastern and Western cinema.

According to film academic Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, Shakespeare's *King Lear* functions here as 'objectified cultural capital' which is appropriated by Kurosawa to form a 'new cultural product'. Yet the film text is denied autonomy regardless of its independent 'aesthetic value' (Yoshimoto 2000: 260): it remains dependent upon the 'original' in the eyes of Western film and Shakespeare criticism, and is thus trapped by a discourse of adaptation that valorizes what is seen as its Shakespearean source text. 'Shakespeare' remains emblematic of Western cultural superiority, and is never assimilated to such an extent that it is subsumed by the adaptation, no matter how tentative the connection. We are undoubtedly left with a sense that the Japanese product remains ostensibly a 'Western' text, denying

1. In his introduction to *Shakespeare on Film* (1998) Robert Shaughnessy lists Korol Lir (1970), Peter Brook's *King Lear* (1971) and *Ran* (1985) as films which form part of the accepted canon of Shakespeare on screen, echoing the scholarly position of other Shakespeare critics: Jack Jorgens (in *Shakespeare on Film*, 1977), Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells (in *Shakespeare and the Moving Image*, 1999) and Kenneth Rothwell (in *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*).

any independent sense of nationhood within cinema that works at the level of Shakespearean adaptation, even if conceived and filmed in the language of the indigenous population. James Goodwin argues that rather than being seen as an adaptation *Ran* should be viewed as an intertext, 'intelligible in terms of other texts that it cites or reiterates, revises and transforms' (Goodwin 1994: 9). To consider Kurosawa's film as intertext as opposed to adaptation not only enables us to avoid the kind of hierarchical placement of one source or one culture above another but also underlines the inherent plurality of all 'texts' contributing to its realization. This essay builds upon the notion of *Ran* as intertext by considering its 'inherent plurality' in terms of its relationship to genre cinema. Just as Kurosawa cites or reiterates the legend of Motonari alongside narrative elements from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, he revises and transforms both the conventions of the Japanese *jidai-geki* genre and those of the mainstream western, subverting viewing expectations and challenging ideologies traditionally associated with such film products.

Ran has remained the property of decades of Western scholarship, acclaimed as part of a *Shakespearean* heritage of global proportions, regardless of Kurosawa's contention that its initial sources come from Japanese histories, mythologies and theatrical practices rather than the Shakespearean source it is so readily identified with:

I had the idea about writing something about the sixteenth-century Japanese war lord Mori Motonari, who had three sons. And having written an outline of the script, it suddenly occurred to me that it was very similar to *King Lear*, so I went back to read it again, and developed it from there. Motonari had three very good sons, so I started thinking about what would have happened if they hadn't been loyal, and developed a fiction around the actual character.

(Kurosawa quoted in Billson 1986: 14)

Written in collaboration with Hideo Oguni and Masato Ide, the screenplay and resulting film are based on a desire to invert the Motonari legend. Yet Western academics persist in the assertion that it is first and foremost a version of a Shakespeare play, some seeing it as a paradoxical contradiction that Kurosawa would deny it is a direct adaptation of *King Lear* (Thompson 1989: 10). Regardless of Kurosawa's motives for asserting the Japanese origins of his screenplay's germination over and above those of *King Lear*, his on-screen visualization of the script is redolent with references to Japanese culture. In his approach to the film, Kurosawa consciously adopts the theatrical conventions of Noh theatre which provide not only a structural framework for his narrative by establishing the 'patterns of polarity and disparity' (McDonald 1994: 142) associated with this form, but also a stylistic template which embodies the form's aesthetic ideal of 'simplicity-as-complexity' (McDonald 1994: 125). The dichotomies which operate at the root of Noh theatre are employed at a visual level, leading to the construction of images of abstract simplicity, and frames infused with an astonishing sense of symmetry. John Collick claims that, due to the *benshi*'s influence on the evolution of Japanese cinema, the Japanese film-maker and his Japanese audience are historically trained to read film

'as a collection of symbolic images' rather than as a medium which should be 'passively experienced as a transparent window on the real world', potentially posing a very different viewing experience for Eastern and Western audiences (Collick 1989: 169).

The influence of historical theatrical practices upon Kurosawa's directorial style is in evidence throughout *Ran*. However, whilst his work imbibes elements of the *benshi* tradition, Kurosawa's films retain a populist Western appeal that challenges their definition as 'art house' cinema. His painterly style is a by-product of Japanese cultural influences as opposed to a sign of his anti-genre leanings. *Ran*'s narrative deals in archetypal characters and follows a classic story design rather than the non-linear narrative patterning and psychological preoccupations associated with art house films; and despite the highly stylized, artistic nature of its images, its deployment of visual, structural and ideological motifs readily associated with the western genre ensures its accessibility to a global mainstream audience. Kenneth Rothwell may argue that *Ran* is 'that rare thing, a reasonably well-funded art movie' having secured a \$10.5 million budget from Serge Silberman – 'a generous patron of the art movie' (Rothwell 1999: 197) – but it owes its commercial success to its affiliations with the mainstream western genre.

According to Anthony Davies, writers like Kurosawa and Grigori Kozintsev were not 'burdened with any sense that in making films they were reducing the impact of Shakespeare's dialogue and theatricality in its original language' (Davies 1990: 23), suggesting that to be free from the constraints of the language can be, for film-maker and adapter, a positive force. Unlike Western adapters, Kurosawa can, it is inferred, appropriate ideas and images from *King Lear* without being hindered by concerns for the 'sanctity' of Shakespeare's verse, leaving him free to realize the essence of the Shakespearean text and the Eastern narratives it engages with in other, much more cinematically visual ways. By exploring the spatial dimensions of the screen image, dialogue becomes almost redundant; his dependence upon visual and aural signifiers, as opposed to verbal signifiers, is in part realized by his use of Noh theatrical conventions and the spatial dimensions associated with that dramatic form. *Ran* is a film that is striking in a visual sense, so much so that reviewers have often been critical of the film as a consequence, seeing Kurosawa's attention to the visual beauty and sophistication of the on-screen image as a detraction from its potential psychological energy. Peter Ackroyd, writing for *The Spectator*, claims that *Ran* is 'Shakespeare drained of its poetry, stripped of its human dimensions, and forced within a schematic framework derived from quite different attitudes and preoccupations' (Ackroyd 1986: 37). Such a reading speaks volumes about the way in which the majority of Western reviewers and academics alike take up a viewing position defined by what Yoshimoto terms 'the politics of cultural traffic' (Yoshimoto 2000: 259) in which West is best and there is little if any acknowledgement that *Ran* is, in fact, an Eastern cultural product with its own specifically Japanese cultural capital.

Whether we view Kurosawa as one who adapts or one who appropriates *King Lear* as an intertextual reference point, the blending of elements of the Eastern and the Western aesthetic results in a uniquely 'staged'

piece of cinema. However, Kurosawa's relationship with both Western and Japanese cinema remains ambivalent. Although credited with bringing Western critical acclaim to Japanese cinema and an affirmation of its status as a national cinema, Kurosawa has at times found himself criticized for attracting such Western enthusiasm. Despite his proclaimed commitment to Japanese culture, he is often regarded by Japanese critics as a film-maker overly concerned with creating images which are accessible to a Western eye rather than being true to their Eastern origins; conversely, some Western critics argue that Kurosawa's exposure to a Western aesthetic has not taken him away from his fundamentally Japanese roots (Burch 1979: 47–49). But what is sorely lacking from such rigid critical 'positioning' is any acknowledgement of the cross-cultural strengths of Kurosawa's work in general and of *Ran* in particular: *Ran* functions as a distinctly Japanese film product with undeniably Western affiliations, not least through its appropriation of the ideological premise underpinning the mainstream western genre.

Although working through a Japanese aesthetic, Kurosawa's global acceptance is in part due to his capacity to imbibe elements of Western film practice, especially in relation to his samurai epics. Kurosawa's earlier samurai film, *Shichinin no Samurai* (1954), pre-empts many of the thematic concerns explored in his later samurai films, including *Kumonosu Jo* (1957), *Yojimbo* (1961), *Kagemusha* (1980) and *Ran*: all embody Kurosawa's preoccupation with the transience of the samurai warrior and the codes and conventions by which he lives, and most explore the samurai's relationship with the land. Contrary to Yoshimoto's claims that Eastern film products are *always* subsumed by Western appropriation, remakes of Kurosawa's samurai films – *Shichinin no Samurai* is reincarnated as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), *Yojimbo* as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) – remain indebted to their Japanese forerunners and are invariably referred to as remakes of Kurosawa classics. But what is most intriguing here is the cultural and ideological cross-fertilization between these historically and geographically specific samurai films and their genre-specific western counterparts. Like Kurosawa's samurai epics, *Ran* is indebted to the westerns of John Ford: Hidetora, *Ran*'s central character, displays an affinity with Ford's lone heroes, placed within monumental landscapes characterized by territorial conflict. In *Ran* Kurosawa exploits such cross-fertilization, creating a film text which deconstructs not only the myth of the samurai but the parallel frontier myths explored in Hollywood's western genre. The reincarnation of *King Lear* as a western, whether in frontier United States or feudal Japan, demonstrates the narrative's capacity to be used as raw material employed in the exploration of the 'myths' of other nations, within the context of other historical eras.

Although *Ran* operates within the realms of the costume drama, unlike heritage reworkings of Shakespeare's plays it does not become merely an exercise in visual excess; neither does it establish a flawed construct of Japanese national identity founded on a romanticized historical viewpoint. Instead, Kurosawa's work showcases the ways in which, through manipulation of past motifs, ranging here from samurai codes to the cinematic conventions of the western, and from Eastern legends to the urtexts of Western culture, *genre* creativity can result in the deconstruction of flawed

national identity. By employing the *jidai-geki* genre, which is associated with glorification of the samurai and its very masculine code, Kurosawa proceeds to illuminate not only the flaws within the code but the redundancy of its 'heroes', disrupting viewing expectations of Western and Eastern audiences. Set in a culturally and historically specific sixteenth-century feudal Japan, during an era known as the Sengoku Jidai and peopled by samurai warriors and war lords, it plays with the conventions of *jidai-geki*, subverting audience expectations by challenging the conventional notions of heroism and loyalty associated with the very Japanese values of the samurai. From the position of social historian, Collick argues that contrary to Western perceptions of samurai honour and obligation, betrayal was an intrinsic part of feudal Japan, the master-servant relationship being far from stable, and the extermination of a lord by one of his own ambitious samurai not uncommon (Collick 1989: 152). The flawed myth of samurai honour and might, perpetuated by the *jidai-geki* genre, is exposed in *Ran*: there are no effective, mythical heroes.

Genre-based adaptations of *King Lear* have traditionally presented us with an essentially male-centred quest, revolving first and foremost around the Everyman figure of Lear and operating within a macho, male-dominated society. Numerous screen versions employ the *Lear* narrative, albeit loosely, within what film academic Thomas Schatz refers to as the genre framework of 'order' or 'determinate space', a genre type characterized by its 'ideologically contested space[s]' (Schatz 2004: 696–698) and to which the gangster, the western, the action and the science fiction film belong. Cinematic off-shoots which employ the *Lear* narrative include western *Broken Lance* (Dmytryk 1954), gangster films *The Godfather* (Coppola 1972), *The Godfather Part II* (Coppola 1974), *The Godfather Part III* (Coppola 1990) and *My Kingdom* (Boyd 2001): in each the 'symbolic arena of action' is all important, as the setting becomes what Schatz terms 'the cultural realm in which fundamental values are in a state of sustained conflict' (2004: 697). The western's classification as a genre of determinate space predetermines the story's thematic concerns and its ideological position, leading us to expect a certain type of macho hero operating within a clearly defined cinematic world. We anticipate an ideologically contested setting in which society's values remain in flux, conflicts over territory and value systems providing the narrative momentum. Ostensibly, the western's story arc moves towards an eventual ordering of the chaos as frontier values are imposed and the 'wilderness' is 'tamed' but its turning points revolve around violent conflict, and the innate instability of these frontier lands remains a constant, even when adhering to the neat, formulaic closures of the Hollywood studio system.

If we view Kurosawa's *Ran* as a pseudo-western it too can be classified as belonging to the genre of order or determinate space in a structural, an ideological and a thematic sense. Social disintegration and the violence inherent in such breakdown remains at the core of both *King Lear* and the western genre, their heroes and those of Kurosawa's feudal Japan sharing an ambivalence towards the values of civilized society. Edward Dmytryk's western, *Broken Lance*, presents a reconfiguration of the *Lear* myth in which the territorial conflicts are seemingly resolved in true Hollywood style by the close of the film. Like Hidetora, lone hero Matt Devereaux has

been instrumental in ordering the initial chaos and finds his hard line values no longer work within the kind of 'civilized' society that now emerges. However, Devereaux's demise is a consequence of progress and follows the story template of the conventional western whereas Hidetora's demise is self-inflicted. Mirroring the actions of Shakespeare's *Lear*, Hidetora brings on the chaos by relinquishing control, subverting our expectations of the samurai lord and by inference the western hero whose function is to tame the wilderness rather than willingly surrender control of it.

As with the western, *Ran's* sense of 'place' is pivotal: its ideologically contested setting becomes of central importance, the rugged landscape forming a 'symbolic arena of action' (Schatz 2004: 696) similar to that of the western's frontier plains within which conflict persists in the absence of a stable milieu. The vast landscape is foregrounded by Kurosawa and its brooding presence becomes part of the film's fabric – a constant situated at the edges of the frame, seemingly 'tamed' by the might of the samurai war lord Hidetora Motonari yet threatening always to engulf humankind and its 'civilizing' influence. Robert Warshow argues that the landscapes of the western serve to diminish, rather than magnify, the stature of the western hero (Warshow 2004: 709). In much the same way, the samurai is invariably pitted against a frontier-like landscape in Kurosawa's *Ran*, highlighting his fragility and that of his value system throughout the narrative. Through allusion to the topographical and iconographic signifiers of the western Kurosawa creates a film world in which questions of honour and loyalty are played out against a backdrop of epic proportions, and in which violence and conflict are the norm.

Hidetora is constructed as the archetypal western hero; he is, in Schatz's genre terminology, 'psychologically static', the 'physical embodiment of an attitude, a style, a world-view of a predetermined and essentially unchanging cultural posture' (Schatz 2004: 695). Unlike Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Hidetora does not seek redemption and his 'heroic' deeds remain questionable, devoid of any motivation other than a lust for power; he is not 'a man more sinned against than sinning' (Shakespeare 1997, 3.2: 58–59). We learn of his violence against the families of Lady Sué and Lady Kaede, and of his vicious treatment of the peasants who work the land he rules. He has little to say about self-discovery, with such speeches as 'Who is it that can tell me who I am?' (Shakespeare 1997, 1.4: 221) – speeches indicative of moments of inner-reflection –, finding no place in Kurosawa's screenplay, and he retains the isolated, distanced stance of the western hero. There are glimpses of Hidetora's conscience and he does become more reflective as his power unravels; but when he asks Sué how she has found the capacity to forgive his violent actions, he is incapable of understanding her Buddhist beliefs and leaves with nothing, unable to feel after a lifetime of violent excess. His conflicts are externalized and we are given few insights into the psychological turmoil triggered by his abuse at the hands of his sons.

Such externalization of conflict is again more reflective of the western genre of mainstream cinema than of the tragicomic conventions we associate with the Western stage. Indeed, Yoshiko Ueno claims that the whole concept of personal tragedy is alien to Japanese culture since 'the search for individual identity, which is usually assumed to be a major focus of *King Lear*,

is alien to Japanese thought' (Ueno quoted in Thompson 1989: 8). In *Ran* there is no sense of the redemptive heroic sacrifice which we have come to associate with Western tragedy. Only Hidetora's wives and concubines are seen to perform the heroic act of *sepuke* when he is faced with defeat inside the burning castle walls. Kurosawa devotes considerable screen time to Hidetora's unsuccessful attempts to mirror their honourable act, visually subverting the conventional portrayal of the samurai hero. Those invested with a sense of the heroic die: Saburo and Sué are eliminated and we sense that the feuding will continue with Lords Fujimaki and Ayabe simply taking over from the Ichimonji clan. The samurai as a social community emerge as a decidedly unheroic collective, devoid of principled heroes. Both Taro and Jiro are constructed as self-serving males who allow themselves to be manipulated by Lady Kaede, and Kurogane's attempts to restore samurai honour by slaying the treacherous Kaede are undermined by our prior knowledge of his own dishonourable acts, not least his cowardly killing of an unsuspecting Taro.

The opening moments of the film serve to illustrate the very tenuous nature of samurai power, positioning the warriors against the backdrop of a landscape which totally overwhelms them, dwarfing them within the frame. Despite the openness and fertility of the surrounding landscape, we sense the discomfort of those held within the frame; the four armed riders, meticulously positioned to enhance the symmetry of the shot as they look out to the four points of a compass, remain unnaturally still. Diegetic sound is eliminated from what should be a very naturalistic moment and is replaced by a soundtrack reminiscent of the horror genre, its high-pitched strings jarring with the serenity of the landscape, enhancing the sense of discomfort experienced by riders and audience. In the series of shots that follows, Kurosawa's attention to the visual balance of each frame remains a stylistic feature: we see three different riders positioned in a line against the backdrop of the mountains, followed by a shot that encompasses five of the riders, again symmetrically placed in a hierarchical formation, again each holding a static pose, the gaze of all riders looking out in the same direction. At this point all sound is eliminated, adding to the tension within the scene and creating a feeling of unsettling inertia that clashes with our expectations of the macho figures held within the camera's gaze.

Even though their masculinity is signalled through costuming and their appearance in masculine pose on horseback, their stillness and anxiety is at odds with the proactive preconceptions we hold of the samurai warrior or of their heroic western counterparts. They are constructed as an anonymous alien presence, impinging upon a landscape established in the opening moments as a brooding entity which will remain throughout the film. Kurosawa creates a tenuous symmetry within these opening shots, visually demonstrating the fragility of each frame's balance, and in so doing infers a similarly fragile image of masculinity. The suggestion that each frame can be so easily disturbed – by a sound, by a movement – is analogous to his construction of masculinity; a masculinity that holds on to power by futile attempts to order the chaos through codes and conventions which, as in the frontier landscapes of the western, cannot be sustained without brute force. Through the very staged nature of the opening frames, reflective of the visual simplicity of Noh theatrical conventions,

Kurosawa foregrounds the notion that man's attempts to order the chaos cannot succeed and, moreover, that masculinity is a construct which can easily be *deconstructed*. The final image within the sequence leaves us with the kind of wide-angled panoramic landscape shot we have come to associate with the western. The human figures appear as minuscule, inconsequential blemishes on the canvas of the landscape, pre-empting the film's bleak closing sequence in which the masculine samurai warriors are replaced by the lone figure of the emasculated Tsurumaru who, though visibly their antithesis, shares with them a vulnerability signalled by the sheer dimensions of the natural world that overwhelms them.

It is against this iconic backdrop, reminiscent of the western plains, that we are given our first glimpse of Hidetora, the first of the figures seen on screen to be invested with any detailed representation. The stillness of the previous sequence abruptly ends as the moving camera tracks a wild boar; the naturalistic diegetic sounds of the boar breathing and the grass rustling disturb the inertia of the previous frame, bringing us back to the real world held within the camera's lens and momentarily altering our position as spectators. Rather than viewing the scene from the distanced standpoint of the establishing shots, we are brought down to the boar's eye level in a rare point of view shot, the boar centrally placed front of camera, situating us as spectators with the hunted animal. From the powerless position of those who watch and wait, the warriors now emerge into the shot from below our sight-line, the embodiment of masculinity and physical aggression, subverting the expectations Kurosawa establishes in the opening frames in which they appear to be the hunted rather than the hunters, and yet again setting up parallels with what is to come later: the hunter Hidetora ultimately becomes the hunted despite his warrior-like stance as he first enters this sequence in dynamic hunting pose, commandeering the screen with his presence whilst the camera tracks his pursuit of the boar, and visually conveying his prowess through the magnificence of his costume and his unrivalled horsemanship, both of which set him apart from the other faceless warriors. He is clearly the most imposing hunter, held firmly in the camera's gaze as he draws back his bow to shoot the boar, and a swift edit to the film's title, *Ran*, further underlines his central role within the narrative, creating a visual shorthand that immediately associates him with the chaos and violent disorder that ensues.

However, in western film text – and in Shakespeare's play script – there emerges what Barry Langford terms 'an almost contradictory interdependency of wilderness and civilisation' (Langford 2005: 65). We move to a markedly staged scene in which we see war lord Hidetora imposing order on the vastness of the landscape that surrounds him; three tented areas are erected, the black and gold of Hidetora's insignia taking centre stage and providing limited shelter from the open, natural spaces that seem to engulf them. The attempted domestication of the landscape is strikingly at odds with the surroundings, and the fragility of the structures erected to signify Hidetora's control and place within the hierarchy of politics and family again lead us to question the stability of each. We are not presented with an image of the war lord Hidetora framed by the might of the castles he has constructed or acquired during his reign, but by the flimsy canvas

structures he has erected to mark out his territorial authority and dominance. The transitory nature of the image presents us with a visual realization of the ambivalent relationship between the binary oppositions of 'wilderness' and 'civilization' outlined by Jim Kitses as essential to the ideological framework of the western genre (Kitses 1969: 11). Any sense of order remains transitory – a mere nod to the 'taming' of the 'wilderness'. Even when we cut to the more substantial images of Hidetora's castles these man-made fortresses seem inconsequential when framed against the backdrop of the plains they are perched precariously upon. Placed on the borders of the unruly frontier Hidetora, like the archetypal western hero, becomes representative of both its lawlessness and its social order, initially able to 'mediate the forces of order and anarchy, yet somehow remaining separate from each' (Schatz 2004: 696), and never completely secure in his power position within the contested spaces of the film world he inhabits.

Hidetora's mask-like appearance and sumptuous costumes lend his figure a regal air; he is first and foremost a powerful war lord rather than a doting father, much as King Lear is constructed firstly as a powerful monarch and secondly as a man who craves outward shows of affection from his children. But as with King Lear, Hidetora's regal mask slips to reveal the vulnerable and needy old man; although seated at the apex of the power triangle staged within the confines of the tented arena he presides over, he dozes, presenting a direct contrast to the opening image of the hunter Hidetora and leading us to question the stability of the power constructs we are presented with. Kurosawa's inverted re-enactment of the Motonari tale, in which he examines what would happen if Motonari's sons were to prove disloyal, provides a visual shorthand for the oncoming chaos that will form the narrative momentum of the film. Saburo quite rightly foresees the chaos and violent disorder that will not only consume the world of the samurai but also the tenuous loyalties at the heart of the Ichimonji family should Hidetora's control be relinquished. It is the warrior pose of Hidetora, established during our first glimpse of him, which must be maintained if the chaos of the title is to be contained. Kathy Howlett suggests that Hidetora feels trapped 'in a rigid system of samurai identity' from which he wants to escape, and cites his frantic desire to quit the tented enclosure he has created, after experiencing a nightmare vision of his own isolation within it, as proof of his subconscious intent (Howlett 2000: 121). But his 'tragedy' ensues when he tries to realize his desire to become other than the distanced hero upholding a certain code of ethics in a morally volatile world. Hidetora can only 'mediate the forces of order and anarchy' (Schatz 2004: 696), which typify the contested spaces of both a feudal Japan and the unruly frontier, when he maintains his position of relative separation.

Issues related to the disintegration of identity are explored via the concept of failed – or failing – patriarchy in *King Lear*, *Ran* and the western genre, and in each there remains an inescapable element of wish-fulfilment to the demise of the paternal figurehead. Signs of Hidetora's weakness and offered tendernesses in the opening sequences are rejected by Saburo since he sees Hidetora's identity as war lord and leader of the Ichimonji clan as being of far more import than his desire to change his role to that of doting, dependent father – a role which has no place within the conventions of a

2. The quotation is from the film's subtitles.

feudal samurai Japan and one which, given Hidetora's past, he is destined to find almost impossible to sustain. By publicly relinquishing control Hidetora is relinquishing his masculinity, redefining his identity and thus amplifying the vulnerability of those who live by the samurai code: his actions ensure not only his own demise but that of the samurai. When Saburo states 'We too are children of this age, reared on strife and chaos', he clarifies the position of the samurai warrior (and by inference the western genre's counterpart) who must battle to ensure order, to maintain the masculinity at the heart of the samurai code, or face its extinction.² Even when 'playing' the role of benevolent father, through Kurosawa's distancing of the spectator and the continued absence of reaction shots, close ups and shot-reverse-shot sequences, Hidetora's emotional credibility remains circumspect, especially when coupled with a performance mode that is highly theatrical and stylized, and spatial positioning which highlights the formal nature of relationships.

This new identity constitutes a fragile construct, as vulnerable and exposed as the image of the riders who form part of the opening *tableau*. Despite the warrior-like pose held by Hidetora as he first enters the frame, there are subtle indications that his masculine image will be continually undermined during the course of the narrative; the subsequent recurring shots in which Hidetora is framed in doorways and through windows are more readily associated with the ways in which women are framed on film (Rutter 2000: 242–243). Within the formal tented enclosure, Kurosawa constructs an image of Hidetora as the majestic, tyrannical old man of Noh theatrical conventions, his face painted with the mask-like properties of the Akujo (McDonald 1994: 141). He is clearly the intended focus of our gaze, his masked appearance contrasting with the naturalism of the other faces within the frame and his opulent costuming overpowering the primary colours of his sons and the black and white costuming of Ayabe and Fujimaki. However, as with later shots of Hidetora in doorways and through windows, we see his face in this formal moment framed by his headgear, its symmetrical lines holding his face for the camera's gaze, again suggesting a shot composition more often employed when suspending an image of the female form, and thus adding to the deconstruction of his masculinity.

During the course of the narrative the only 'heroic' individual is eliminated: in a moment which is cinematically inconsequential, Saburo is unceremoniously shot as he rides with the rescued Hidetora, his death momentarily passing unmarked. Those who have adhered only to the violence of the samurai code have suffered a similar end, Taro, like Saburo, being shot not during the onslaught of battle but during a shockingly quiet moment. There are no heroic confrontations in which the might of the samurai is foregrounded; the only shot which sustains a heroic image of samurai warriors on horseback comes as Saburo's troops vacate the Third Castle, the blue and white plumes of the riders dominating the screen from a low angle shot. Even so, they are seen leaving rather than holding their position. Saburo is physically aligned with the regenerative attributes of the natural world and is seen only within the open spaces of that natural world throughout the film; yet, despite his good intentions and his visual affinity with nature, he is unable to sustain the role of masculine hero,

suggesting that Kurosawa is again asking us to contemplate the inefficacy of masculinity and the patriarchal systems on which it is inherently dependent. It is the emasculated Kyoami who remains as protector of Hidetora during the course of the narrative, leading us to question the roles of sons and samurais.

Unlike the more conservative western genre adapters of fifties Hollywood, Kurosawa's intertextual referencing of the *Lear* storyline utilizes the concept of powerful, demonized womanhood. Female lead, Lady Kaede, is neither the 'happy whore' nor the dependable, domesticated 'pioneer homemaker' of the conventional western genre, though there are warped elements of each within her on-screen construct. Despite her diminished position as a woman in a feudal Japan, Kaede, in contrast to the men around her, emerges as a character able to retain her own codes of honour and family loyalty. She operates within the confines of her social position (as do the women of the western genre) as a seemingly powerless woman in a feudal Japan and yet she is the perpetrator of horrendous acts of violence which ultimately lead to her planned disintegration of the Ichimonji clan and the samurai code. Kaede embodies the histories of demonized woman in Japanese folklore and theatre (Serper 2001: 148–149); but Kurosawa skilfully intertwines this with allusions to demonized womanhood at the core of Western mythologies via visual references to the serpent as iconic of woman as temptress in both cultures. Her persona is also invested with elements of the archetypal monster of the horror genre. Her seduction of Jiro plays with horror conventions: elements of the sexually predatory vampire are embodied in the seduction sequence as her 'penetrating mouth', biting and licking blood, becomes what horror critic Darryl Jones terms a 'displaced version of the familiar phobic image of the vagina dentata, simultaneously enveloping and castrating' (Jones 2002: 85–86). Contrary to cinematic conventions, Jiro becomes the feminized focal point of the camera's gaze and Kaede becomes the epitome of horror critic Barbara Creed's 'monstrous-feminine' (Creed 1993: 152), challenging accepted notions of femininity which, by definition, equate with passivity. Like the 'big-hearted' prostitute of the western genre she is a sexualized being, but there is nothing passive about Kaede's sexuality. Actively performing the role of castrator, Kaede usurps the male position, wielding Jiro's knife as part of her sado-masochistic foreplay and orchestrating the downfall of the Ichimonji clan through her manipulation of its supposedly 'heroic' samurai lords.

As the males around her demonstrate their weaknesses and their inability to uphold the values of the samurai code they supposedly live by, Kaede strives to undermine the conventions that are pivotal to that code and to matters relating to family honour and loyalty. Her own loyalty to family is proven, the role of daughter being far more important to her than that of dutiful and submissive wife, whereas the sons of Hidetora, the next generation of the Ichimonji clan, have shown themselves to be either disloyal and dishonourable or ineffectual and unable to wield patriarchal control. However, by challenging gender constructs, Kaede, like Goneril and Regan in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, ensures her own reconstruction as demon. Kurogane's decapitation of Kaede serves as a reassertion of patriarchal dominance, her figure finally framed and contained by the legs

of the males who surround her. Inevitably, she is executed because she is a threat to samurai values and the samurai identity, linked as it is to the masculinity she has sought to undermine.

The heroic stature of war lord Hidetora is undermined continually as he, like the archetypal heroes of mainstream westerns, tries to renegotiate his position within this unstable world; having maintained control through his violent, despotic leadership, he is unable to see that to relinquish his control will unleash anarchy. The film's ideologically contested space, in which territorial conflicts are a historical given, becomes a site of violent social disintegration on a par with the societal disintegration found in westerns in general and *King Lear* in particular. In Kurosawa's realization of a feudal Japan the 'values' of the samurai are in flux: the landscape may have been 'tamed' by Motonari and a social order established, but his capacity to hold back the 'wilderness' which threatens to engulf his world at any moment is limited, and forms the narrative momentum of the film. Despite Kurosawa's reputation for creating what are regarded as very masculine films, in *Ran* it is this disintegration of masculinity and patriarchal institutions that provides the narrative focus, and it is in this respect that Kurosawa's film connects with Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the dramatic exploration of the demise of patriarchy underpinning each text's ideological and thematic preoccupations. Furthermore, Kurosawa draws parallels between his potentially anarchic feudal setting and the western frontier, and in so doing deconstructs the cult of masculinity at the core of both genres. In the absence of firmly established 'frontier' or samurai codes of conduct alike, the precarious stability such codes help to maintain dissipates and the cult of masculinity which underpins them disintegrates.

Kurosawa's depiction of patriarchy in crisis leads to an apocalyptic close in which all suffer and none are redeemed, and we are led to the conclusion that the very masculine codes and values at the core of patriarchy are destructive, inherently violent and unsustainable: *this* apocalyptic vision is devoid of the redemptive heroism we more readily associate with Shakespeare's play. *Ran* and *King Lear* proclaim their preoccupation with universal truths and a scepticism as to the validity of patriarchal institutions at both a familial and a political level. However, whilst Kurosawa's depiction of the demise of patriarchy shares with its Shakespearean counterpart a concern with those who transgress gender boundaries, it is the dilution of the masculinity at the core of samurai values which sets *Ran* apart and ensures that it remains a work invested with its own 'cultural capital', existing within its own cultural reference points, Shakespeare's decidedly Westernized version of the play operating here as intertext rather than source text. Although widely regarded as part of the canon of Shakespeare on screen, and appropriated by a Shakespearean heritage of global proportions, Kurosawa's *Ran* refuses to be consumed by its Western affiliations and asserts instead its affiliations with the western genre in terms of its ideological premise and its iconic properties. If, as Tony Howard suggests, the conventions of the western can be seen as a rein-statement of Renaissance codes of conduct revolving around *issues* of masculinity and 'poetic justice' (Howard 2000: 299), then the codes and conventions of the samurai may also be viewed as such. However, what Kurosawa proceeds to dramatize in *Ran* is the demise of the samurai, and

by inference the demise of the western hero and Shakespeare's tragic hero, deconstructing the heroic myths of masculinity which surround these iconic figures in literature and film on a global scale. His film offers a social critique of patriarchal systems across a range of genres, from Japanese *jidai-geki* epic to Renaissance tragedy, to Hollywood western, linking the concerns embedded in Shakespeare's *King Lear* with those of other historical eras, other nations, other mythologies.

Works cited

- Ackroyd, Peter (1986), 'Review: *Ran*', *The Spectator*, 15 March, p. 37.
- Billson, Anne (1986), 'The Emperor', *Time Out*, 12 March, p. 14.
- Burch, Noël (1979), *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*, London: Scholar Press.
- Collick, John (1989), *Shakespeare, Cinema and Society*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Creed, Barbara (1993), *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, London: Routledge.
- Davies, Anthony (1990), *Filming Shakespeare's Plays: The Adaptations of Olivier, Welles and Kurosawa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davies, Anthony and Wells, Stanley (1999), *Shakespeare and the Moving Image: The Plays on Film and Television*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goodwin, James (1994), *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Howard, Tony (2000), 'Shakespeare's Cinematic Offshoots', in Russell Jackson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 295–313.
- Howlett, Kathy (2000), *Framing Shakespeare on Film*, Ohio: Ohio University Press.
- Jones, Darryl (2002), *Horror: A Thematic History in Fiction and Film*, London: Arnold.
- Jorgens, Jack (1977), *Shakespeare on Film*, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press.
- Kitses, Jim (1969), *Horizons West*, London: Thames and Hudson Limited.
- Kurosawa, Akira, Oguni, Hideo and Masato, Ide (1986), *Ran: Screenplay* (trans. Tadashi Shishido), Boston and London: Shambala.
- Langford, Barry (2005), *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- McDonald, Keiko (1994), *Japanese Classical Theatre in Films*, London: Associated University Presses.
- Rothwell, Kenneth (1999), *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*, London: Neal-Schuman.
- Rutter, Carol Chillington (2000), 'Looking at Shakespeare's Women on Film', in Russell Jackson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 241–260.
- Schatz, Thomas (2004), 'Hollywood Genres: Film Genre and Genre Film', in Leo Braudy and Martin Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism* (6th ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 691–698.
- Serper, Zvilca (2001), 'Lady Kaede in Kurosawa's *Ran*: Verbal and Visual Characterisation Through Animal Traditions', *Japan Forum*, 13:2, 145–158.
- Shakespeare, William (1997), *King Lear* (ed. R.A. Foakes), London: The Arden Shakespeare.

- Shaughnessy, Robert (1998), *Shakespeare on Film*, Houndsmill: Macmillan.
- Thompson, Ann (1989), 'Kurosawa's *Ran*: Reception and Interpretation', *East-West Film Journal*, 3:2, 1–13.
- Warshaw, Robert (2004), 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', in Leo Braudy and Martin Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism* (6th ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 708–713.
- Yoshimoto, Mitsuhiro (2000), *Kurosawa, Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*, Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Filmography

- A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), dir. Sergio Leone (USA).
- Broken Lance* (1954), dir. Edward Dmytryk (USA).
- Kumonosu Jo* (1957), dir. Akira Kurosawa (Japan).
- Kagemusha* (1980), dir. Akira Kurosawa (Japan).
- My Kingdom* (2001), dir. Don Boyd (UK).
- Ran* (1985), dir. Akira Kurosawa (Japan).
- Shichinin no Samurai* (1954), dir. Akira Kurosawa (Japan).
- Yujimbo* (1961), dir. Akira Kurosawa (Japan).
- The Godfather* (1972), dir. Francis Ford Coppola (USA).
- The Godfather: Part II* (1974), dir. Francis Ford Coppola (USA).
- The Godfather: Part III* (1990), dir. Francis Ford Coppola (USA).
- The Magnificent Seven* (1960), dir. John Sturges (USA).

Suggested citation

- Griggs, Y. (2008), '*Ran*: Chaos on the 'Western' Frontier', *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 1: 2, pp. 103–116, doi: 10.1386/jafp.1.2.103/1

Contributor details

Dr Yvonne Griggs has recently been appointed as Lecturer in English (with a specialism in adaptation studies) at De Montfort University, where she was also awarded her Ph.D. Her research focuses on the relationship between screen Shakespeare and genre cinema. She has published articles in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, and she is currently working on a publication for Methuen (*Screen Adaptations* series – *King Lear* on Screen).

Contact: De Montfort University, Clephan Building, The Gateway, Leicester LE1 9BH, UK.

E-mail: ygriggs@dmu.ac.uk

Displacing the Gods? Agency and Power in Adaptations of Ancient History and Myth

Stuart Price *De Montfort University*

Abstract

This article considers the ways in which ancient cultures are represented within contemporary cinematic narrative. The study uses the notion of attribution as its starting point, and focuses on two recent cinematic adaptations, Snyder's 300 (2007) and Petersen's Troy (2004). Attribution is defined as the retrospective assignation of particular sensibilities and beliefs to ancient cultures. The directors and/or authors who generate perspectives on the past may not appreciate the exact provenance of the traditions from which they have drawn their material. Displacing the Gods? examines some of the historical and literary antecedents of modern attitudes, in order to place cinematic accounts of Thermopylae and Troy in a more objective context. The second major feature of the enquiry concerns the ways in which power or agency is assigned to the various characters and forces within the films studied. Particular reference is made to the distinction between human and divine activity, and the evident need to offer 'rational' explanations of events while reinforcing the view that ancient Greek societies were driven by religious superstition.

Keywords

attribution
agency
belief
myth
narrative
polis

'The god's action is often sudden, momentary, and therefore only of passing value'

(Dietrich 1965: 301)

Introduction: belief, agency and 'historical accuracy'

This article begins by considering the process of attribution, in which objects, persons or entire societies are invested with certain qualities. It examines two closely related instances of this phenomenon, drawn from recent cinematic adaptations. The first example, discussed primarily through analysis of Zack Snyder's *300* (2007), but also with reference to Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004), is the retrospective assignation of particular *sensibilities and beliefs* to ancient cultures, historical figures or legendary characters. The second aspect of the study concerns the ascription of operational power or *agency* to human and/or divine forces within the complex story-world of the *Iliad*, and the translation of this awareness into mainstream narrative fiction.

Both practices raise questions of historical accuracy, as well as the inevitably complex nature of adaptation in general. The first activity mentioned above, which assigns particular values to past events or persons, includes any type of imaginary re-creation in which either a form of

1. The Spartans and their allies made a famous stand against the Persian invaders at the battle of Thermopylae.

awareness, or a distinct world-view, is associated with a 'pre-modern' social order. This exercise is usually based on the conviction that the values being ascribed to ancient societies are, to all intents and purposes, genuine features of the epoch described. When this is the case, certain fundamental issues can remain unexamined.

There is, besides the populist impulse that seeks to 'bring the past to life' through the apparent simplification of ancient social orders, a larger question that touches on the established practice of historians themselves, whose use of periodization is 'both the requisite framework and the false friend' of rational composition (Strauss, in Golden and Toohey 1997: 165). Such difficulties, whether they concern fictional accounts or historical analysis, include the need to appreciate the layers of representation that often compose an 'original' source (see the discussion of the *Iliad*, below), as well as the necessity of understanding the complexity of ancient narratives, which amalgamate political, martial and religious perspectives.

It is therefore worth noting that ancient works of history, upon which modern conceptions may be founded, had a literary quality, and in one scholar's opinion 'hovered uneasily between rhetoric and moral philosophy' (Davies 1993: 3). This question is not simply confined to antiquity, however, as there is also a debate over the relationship between contemporary research and the narrative genres in which it is often expressed, and indeed great controversy over the character of textual expression itself (Greetham 1999).

Yet, within this general perception of complexity, one argument seems to persist: the notion that certain outstanding deeds *speak for themselves*, and that there is little disparity between their original function and the significance they attain in later accounts. The most obvious example of this position would be the celebration of Spartan resistance to the Persian invasion of 480 BCE, an event that has long provided a paradigmatic example of bravery and determination in the face of impossible odds. Even 'self-evident' truths, however, require some knowledge of their precise context.

The issue here is bound up with the magical incantation of the number '300', reproduced within so many texts, and the meaning assigned to the role of the Spartan combatants. Spartan leadership of a holding operation, carried out while Athens and Sparta conducted public festivals, which then *through necessity* became an act of self-sacrifice, is turned in Snyder's hands into an intentional act of defiance against overwhelming opposition (the movie's tagline is '300 against a million'). In making this claim, Snyder demonstrates a willingness to conflate issues that the original source, Herodotus' *Histories*, either keeps separate or never regards as significant. So, for example, Herodotus describes an inscription that recorded the number of Greek troops who died at Thermopylae¹ defending the narrow pass against repeated assaults, as 'four thousand'; the epitaph was made, we are told, 'in honour of the whole force' (Herodotus 2003: 495). This is important because it recognizes but does not exaggerate Spartan leadership and, as a consequence, never imagines that Spartan virtue can be used to make unfounded assertions about a 'democratic' or 'free' Greek alliance.

Herodotus certainly mentions the three hundred Spartans with particular gravity, and notes the existence of a 'special epitaph' describing their

adherence to the principled execution of their orders; he is certainly aware of their particular valour in deciding to remain at their posts when their destruction was finally assured, but he never assigns the entire spirit of defiance to their presence. The Spartans may rightly be described as the backbone of Greek resistance, but were aided by the determination of their allies; the Thespians, for example, elected to stay with the Spartans in the final stage of the battle.

The popular notion of three hundred Spartan hoplites, dedicated to carrying out a holding operation on behalf of a democratic Greek alliance, ignores both the material conditions of political and economic existence during the period, with its stark contradiction between elite citizenship and slavery, and the irrefutable contribution of Sparta's allies, who served in rotation at the Phocian wall during the first two days of fighting at Thermopylae (Matthews 2006: 149). The appearance at the battle of troops from other allied cities is an important element of the historical narrative, as it bears on the nature of the political and military partnership that the Greek states had configured.

The complexity of this alliance is demonstrated, for example, by the expectation that each contingent served under its own officers, with overall command assigned to the Spartan king Leonidas; this arrangement recognized the relative independence of city-states, but also provided an alternative source of authority requiring councils of war rather than the simple production of orders from a unitary command.² Snyder's film does display the presence of other Greek adherents to the cause, but the fact that together the Greeks had assembled an army of some seven thousand is removed from the narrative.³ It is, therefore, the ideological emphasis given to certain incidents that encourages over-simplification of events and, in the case of Sparta, erroneous comparisons between different periods of human society.⁴

In making an evaluation of the ancient world, therefore, it is not unusual to present life in antiquity through a series of long-established conceptual frames. The audience for films set in Ancient and legendary Greece, for example, may encounter a number of consistent themes; these include the notion of a people close both to nature and its presiding deities. Where more specific historical allusions are made, however, Athens is celebrated for its love of democracy and culture, while Sparta is made to represent austerity, military prowess, and unrivalled heroism. Concentration upon the 'self-evident' virtues displayed at Thermopylae might reinforce the Spartan reputation for unrivalled heroism, but it is exactly this kind of exercise that obscures other less comfortable passages in history, such as, for example, the Spartan defeat by the Athenians at Pylos in 425 BCE (see Strassler 1988 and 1990).

Cinematic myths: austerity and courage in Spartan society

An important question to emerge, therefore, from the first phase of this enquiry, is the extent to which modern 'auteurs' (including writers, directors and producers), are conscious of the *history of attribution* that lies behind their own assumptions about the past. In other words, when film-makers depict the psychological and political outlook of the 'ancients', it is important to ask if, at the very least, they understand the antecedents of the view

2. See for example Herodotus' remark to the effect that 'the Persian army was now close to the pass, and the Greeks, suddenly doubting their power to resist, held a conference to consider the advisability of retreat' (Herodotus 2003: 488).
3. Herodotus lists the numbers of soldiers for each state (Herodotus 2003: 486).
4. Hodkinson, writing about ancient Sparta, notes that there have been many attempts to compare it 'with entire societies', while a more productive task might be to make an 'analysis of common issues faced by ancient and modern states' (2007: 1).

5. A social narrative is a story that offers a 'broadly plausible' explanation for 'events in the world' (Price 1996: 7). It is in essence an ideological composition designed to reinforce certain attitudes and perspectives.
6. Powell explains that the helots were 'farmers and craftworkers' who produced 'most of the wealth on which Sparta's citizens, the Spartiates, lived', and notes that the degree of Sparta's reliance on slavery 'was unusually great, even by the standards of classical Greece' (Powell 1988: 98).

they perpetuate. It is possible to argue that the *rhetorical* circumstances of adaptation were originally established by ancient politicians and military leaders, who deliberately fostered many of the most enduring impressions of their own societies. Using every available means, from architectural enlargement to the manipulation of battlefield presence, they struggled to enhance the reputation of their city-states.

Some notions, however, are more clearly the production of contemporary 'social narratives' than others (Price 1996: 7).⁵ The idea that the Sparta of 480 BCE was committed to the defence of a robust pan-Hellenic democracy, offered in Snyder's *300* as a rationale for Leonidas' heroic stand at Thermopylae, is a more recent conception, and can be traced to a number of sources. This view can be found in Frank Miller's graphic novel, *300* (1998), which formed the basis for Snyder's narrative (and which explains its particular visual character), but also appears in Rudolph Maté's *The 300 Spartans* (1961), which dramatizes Greek resistance as an enlightened defence of democratic principles. The true *modern* origin of such a perspective lies, however, in the growth during the eighteenth century of an 'emotional affiliation' with ancient Greece that reached into 'many aspects of artistic and political life' (Morris 2000: 211). The battle of Thermopylae came to represent the exercise of values that were increasingly associated with Hellenism – liberty, virtue and patriotism (Morris 2000: 213).

If these qualities are indeed to be associated with Spartan resistance to the Persian invader, then it does not mean that such virtues may all be unequivocally associated with Spartan activity in general; liberty is an obvious example. Without, for instance, a rational assessment of the role of slavery in maintaining the basic functions of Greek society (within both Sparta and its 'democratic' rival Athens), the true worth of such attributes becomes impossible to assess. The economic system that allowed Sparta's devotion to arms is removed from Snyder's narrative; in the film, the warriors are shown as entirely independent, without the slaves who would have carried much of their equipment and would in fact have sustained the entire excursion.⁶ The helots, a class of slaves drawn from the conquered Greek lands of Lakonia and Messenia, also provided auxiliary troops. A year after Thermopylae, at the battle of Plataea in 479 BCE, five thousand Spartan hoplites were supported by no less than thirty-five thousand lightly armed helots (Herodotus 2003: 566).

While the movie *300* has, in some quarters, prompted the accusation that it promotes 'fascist' or racist values, the more profound question is how demonstrably evil practices such as slavery can be ignored in the process of lauding ancient Greek culture as somehow inherently *democratic*; by extension, an even more disturbing issue is not only how 'democracy' in the modern era has become the alibi for a range of vicious assaults on liberty, but how the entire conception of democracy was, from the outset, designed to attain a moral justification for the *efficient* production of force.

If the existence of slavery presents one outstanding difficulty, then the question of Spartan military capability and their renowned courage in battle is another. In one scene of Snyder's *300*, Leonidas is asked by his Greek allies why he has brought so few combatants to challenge the might of

Xerxes' army. His response takes the form of a practical demonstration; he asks his interlocutors to describe their usual occupations. Finding that his allies are not professional fighters, he shows that the primary Spartan function is warfare. The clear implication is that he has in effect brought more soldiers to the war than other city-states, who have provided only amateurs; this is reinforced later in the movie by a voice-over which describes, in patronizing terms, the well-meaning but haphazard contribution made by non-Spartiates to the fighting. These sequences, the first drawn from the legendary utterance of a Lacedaemonian general, are fairly typical of the over-dramatization of Spartan values reproduced in *300*.

The question of fear in Spartan society

In fact, there are strong arguments to be made that the whole edifice of Spartan society depended upon the reproduction of fear, rather than the simple exercise of courage. This is not to deny the central importance of bravery and steadfastness as much-vaunted *values* in Spartan life, but simply to point out that the much more numerous helots were kept in their place by a form of terror that reflected their masters' own trepidation at the prospect of a slave revolt. Indeed, some authors ascribe weakness and fear to many of Sparta's martial and political activities. Anton Powell, for example, referring to the Peloponnesian war (431 to 404 BCE), fought between Athens and Sparta (each supported by their respective allies), notes that Sparta made frequent use of 'the recourse of the weak: terrorism' (Powell 1988: 160). This terrorism not only included the execution of captured opponents, then a standard practice in war, but also the deliberate suppression of Sparta's helot population, a subjugated people who were on one occasion deceived into believing that their most prominent representatives would be freed by their masters. This was, in fact, a ruse designed to identify those individuals who might pose a threat to Spartan rule; some two thousand or so who were identified as most worthy of freedom were then murdered by their overlords (Powell 1988: 250).

Preston H. Epps, an earlier analyst of Spartan weaknesses and their associated fears, began his study of the Spartan character by identifying Herodotus' account of Thermopylae, together with Plutarch's 'glowing tributes to Spartan courage', as the origin of the conviction that 'the term "Spartan" has become universally synonymous with the most daring in fearlessness and military prowess' (Epps 1933: 12). Following John Pentland Mahaffy, Epps contended that the valour of this warlike people was constructed artificially through 'rigorous and unparalleled discipline' (1933: 12) and was not a natural attribute of their psychological make-up. The controversy over the exact meaning of Spartan actions, from their 'laconic' speech to their behaviour in combat, remains a controversial topic, but the contending positions do not need to be perceived as mutually exclusive.

For example, the high value placed in Spartan society on the qualities of courage, loyalty and tenacity in battle, do not contradict Epps' thesis, because it remains the case that the standing of each citizen hoplite depended on the *demonstration* of such virtues. Where this could not be attained, the consequences for the male individual and his entire family group could be extreme. The story of Aristodemus, the Spartan warrior who was ordered away from the battle of Thermopylae is a case in point.

7. Detienne notes that 'in about 530 Xenophanes, in the name of the fledgling philosophy, forcefully rejected the whole collection of stories about Titans, Giants and Centaurs, including those purveyed by Homer and Hesiod [...]. In the first place they were forgeries, *plasmata*, or pure fictions; and secondly, they were barbarian stories, tales told by "others"' (Detienne 2005: 30). This scholar reinforces this point with reference to Thucydides, who 'defined the field of historical knowledge by excluding the abulous, or *mythodes*, from his conceptual territory and assigning it to a separate domain that took over a quite different way of recounting and recording things' (Detienne 2005: 31).

According to Herodotus this individual had suffered an eye infection that had rendered him unable to see, but a companion similarly afflicted had returned to the fight, against the instructions of the Spartan king, and had been killed. On his return to Sparta, Aristodemos suffered ostracism and made an attempt to redeem himself at the battle of Plataea. Here, his impatience caused him to disobey orders and mount a premature attack on the Persian ranks, resulting in his death. In failing to meet the standards of discipline set by his peers, this warrior's honour was still not restored (de Souza et al. 2004).

The *social* condition of the individual subject in antiquity was perhaps as, if not more, difficult to maintain for those who had achieved prominence than their modern counterparts. It was considerably more challenging to 'reinvent' the self if one's reputation suffered a fatal blow, partly because these societies were considerably smaller than those envisioned within a mass 'mediated' culture. Clear differences in the composition of the self may also be discovered in what Slavoj Žižek calls 'the very nerve centre of the liberal ideology', which he believes is the dubious idea of freedom of choice, 'grounded in the notion of the 'psychological' subject endowed with propensities he or she strives to realise' (Žižek 2001: 116).

The '*polis*', myth and the adaptation of the *Iliad*

One of the most significant absences that accounts for divergence between the attitudes and outlook attributable to 'modern' and 'ancient' individuals lies in the structure of the city-state or *polis*, together with its associated religious observances. François de Polignac (1995) makes the important observation that politics and territoriality were just one aspect of civic organization. Dora Pozzi and John Wickersham reinforce this point, demonstrating that the *polis* was indeed a territory with physical structures, citizens and a constitution, but that it was also a cultural phenomenon, heavily reliant for its overall identity on reference to mythology (Pozzi and Wickersham 1991: 1). Detienne argues that 'since the thought of the eighteenth century BCE at least, the Greeks had occupied a strategic position', as they were 'in command of the frontier between fable and religion, between myth and philosophy' (Detienne 2005: 26). It is, moreover, the Homeric tradition that provided the bedrock of Greek identity, and allowed the gradual evolution in which 'myth was overtaken by philosophical thought' (Detienne 2005: 27).⁷

Yet, at the point of their entry into the social order (whether this is regarded as the moment of birth or of 'coming of age'), all human beings encounter an obdurate reality of objects and structures that pre-date their appearance and are not of their making. Thus, the trajectory of individuals is not only determined by physical limitations, but by pre-existing social configurations, by groups and institutions and the *belief systems* they follow and into which the individual is born. Although it may be argued that it is 'ideology' in general, expressed as a series of material practices, that determines the power of social actors, it is also the particular point of insertion into the social fabric that helps to determine human destiny. Goran Therborn discusses this question with respect to class, arguing that 'the reproductive problem of the social order' is to 'subject and qualify' infants into appropriate social roles (Therborn 1980: 86).

The production of individuals who inhabit *roles* requires the ability to 'assume' belief through the need to *occupy positions* (both ideological and structural). This is in a sense an economic necessity, and always therefore a material condition with felt consequences, enabling distinctions to be made between full citizens with identifiable rights and those strangers or servants or enemies who do not share the same provenance. The Athenians, for example, regarded themselves as having sprung from the earth of Attica, while the Spartans traced their origins to the demi-god Herakles; both conceptions could confer rights of citizenship on those accepted as belonging to the *polis*.

In the ancient world, such myths (together with practices like the recitation of Greek hymns at the Great Dionysia) provided, as argued above, a common basis for 'speaking about gods' (Burkert 1985: 73), and as such formed a fundamental component of religious perception, which in turn informed a general moral consciousness. In addition, formal belief in the truth of such ideas helps to explain how subordinate groups could be treated with inequity, yet also in some cases allowed respite from their condition. Robin Osborne contends that 'physical abuse and grants of freedom' directed at Athenian slaves were 'not only contradictory but causally related', in that their masters 'abused slaves because they also freed them'; he goes on to argue that the unity of the citizen body 'had to be sustained by the construction of contrasts with others' (Osborne 2004: 95).

All Greek cities shared, besides the names and principal functions of the gods, common ritual procedures such as the principle of sacrifice (Parker 1996: 3) and, insofar as mythical narratives were eventually presented as a 'unified and canonical pan-Hellenic' corpus (Pozzi and Wickersham 1991: 4), the social function of myth in the Greek world could be described as universal. The religious *experience* of citizens, however, was, as indicated above, largely governed by the practices and conventions of their own particular *polis* (Parker 1996: 3).⁸ The parochial animation of myth (based on local circumstances), is not however what our contemporary world means when it refers to the Greek narrative tradition (Pozzi and Wickersham 1991: 4). The typical view of the Greek story-world as a coherent but distant sphere of events and personalities, distinguishes a modern from an ancient sensibility; for the Greeks, myth was an immediate and lived experience. The *polis* was, according to Pozzi and Wickersham, 'a state of mind' that expressed itself in myth (Pozzi and Wickersham 1991: 2).

Many aspects of religious custom may of course be recognized by modern individuals, and a proportion will themselves adhere to certain religious beliefs. The producers of a popular 'sword and sandal' epic, however, have to maximize audience interest through the circulation of a more secular currency. In Petersen's *Troy* (2004), these points of identification include reference to the 'thousand ships', the use of a star-protagonist (Pitt), computer-generated spectacle, and intertextual references to other comparable genres.⁹ Yet, as we shall see, the tenets of secular modernity have not been allowed completely to erase the conceptual reference-points of ancient culture. A significant example relates to religion; despite the assignation of a supposedly modern scepticism to certain characters, it is

8. This observation should not detract from the importance of shrines and festivals which attracted visitors and adherents from across Greece and which helped to produce 'such sense as the Greeks had of national identity' (Parker 1996: 3).
9. These passages refer to events in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) and, I would argue, the opening sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg 1998), in which the experiences of troops in the first wave of landing craft is mimicked by the beaching of Achilles' vessel.

10. The works of both Hesiod and Homer, according to Herodotus, 'created a theogony for the Greeks' (see Pozzi and Wickersham 1991: 4).

not quite the case, as Georg Danek claims, that 'the gods are simply left out of the plot' (Danek 2007: 69). This is pursued further in the discussion below.

In the meantime, the appearance of historical anomalies is perhaps inevitable in a film of this nature, which has to rework an epic itself notable for a multiplicity of contradictions. As Joachim Latacz argues, 'Homer uses Troy only as a setting', in which 'he places a wide range of varied events' (Latacz 2004: 171). Yet at the same time, the poet appears to know things 'such as the Bronze Age names of the besiegers', which he could not have known 'if he had been privy to no historical information' (Latacz 2004: 171). It is the mixture of thematic, evidential and narrative material that makes the study of the epic and its adaptation so complicated.

A brief reference to two of *Troy's* apparent anachronisms might illustrate the more trivial challenges of adaptation, before internal discrepancies in the Homeric narrative are considered. One example relates to Achilles and his Myrmidons, who wear armour modelled on late-eighth century BCE examples, while many of the other Greeks use weapons and shields more appropriate to the 'post-palatial' period, which began in the twelfth and ended in the early-eighth century. In cinematic terms, this is perhaps no more than a convenient method of distinguishing between a group of elite warriors and the general mass of soldiery, but it provides the kind of anomaly that is noticed by specialists interested in historical detail.

The *Iliad*: film and fidelity

The *Iliad*, an epic account of a late-twelfth or early-thirteenth century BCE war, is thought to have been circulated as a formulaic oral narrative, first given unitary structure by either a single or by multiple authors in the eighth century BCE, and then written down in the sixth century BCE under Athenian direction. According to Latacz, the author of the *Iliad* was probably the first Greek poet to write down and thus formalize his verse (Latacz 2004: 151). Homer becomes thus not only the first poet of Greece, but also 'the greatest' (Latacz 2004: 153). The poem, some 15,000 lines in length, helped to establish a pan-Hellenic conception of the gods (Burkert 1985: 4)¹⁰ and provided a great resource for fifth century elegiac and lyric poetry, which contained many allusions to its verses (Garner 1990). The question of *fidelity* in adaptation is a recurring issue (Whelehan 1999: 3), and in this case begins with the reworking of Homeric episodes and images in later narratives. So, for example, the Homeric parallel evident in Minnermus' fragmentary poem on the fleeting nature of youth repeats the dilemma of having to face and decide between two equally repugnant fates: old age or death (see Garner 1990: 3-8 for a description of the contents of this verse).

In the *Iliad*, which presents the choice that confronts Achilles, the two alternatives both carry, in the hero's eyes, some attraction, because 'early death will bring noble fame' and old age a 'long, albeit undistinguished, life amid the comforts of home' (Garner 1990: 4). Minnermus' allusion to this source has altered its meaning and reduced the power of the dilemma. In a similar fashion, the poet Tyrtaeus refers to Priam's fear that he will be killed at the fall of Troy and his body torn apart by dogs, but turns it into

a call to Spartan youth to fight and die in the front rank of the army; the notion of a pitiable end for an old man is regarded as a shameful fate, while the death of a young warrior is described as ‘beautiful’ (Garner 1990: 9).

The question of accuracy persists, however, in *any* form that makes serious reference to the *Iliad* as a source. Yet, although there are many ‘inaccuracies’ in Petersen’s blockbuster *Troy* (2004), it is my contention that far from being a travesty of the original values that animate the *Iliad*’s narrative, it does in certain respects provide a convincing account of human *character* and motivation, as seen within the context of hierarchical social orders; the behaviour of the protagonists in the film is clearly mediated by what may be called a religious and cultural consciousness.

Nonetheless, the impulse to assign ‘inappropriate’ attitudes to particular individuals, outlined in the introduction, and especially to present a *sceptical* account of divine agency, is exemplified in the following scenes from Petersen’s *Troy* (2004). In these exchanges, Priam and his son Hektor discuss the capacity of Apollo to protect the Trojans:

- | | |
|---------|--|
| Hektor: | Father, we can’t win this war. |
| Priam: | Apollo watches over us. Even Agamemnon is no match for the gods. |
| Hektor: | And how many battalions does the sun god command? |
| Priam: | Do not mock the gods. ¹¹ |

Here, the capacity of the god is artificially separated into two forms of influence; his benign surveillance is differentiated from the power to deploy actual formations in battle. The narrative seems to offer this as an insight into generational difference, in which the father is complacent and the son takes on some of the values of the modern political realist. This certainly provides a point of entry for an audience, but fails to reproduce the consensus about the *general* function and appearance of the immortals, held by characters within the *Iliad* itself. So, for example, when Menelaos and Paris draw lots for the opportunity to throw the first spear in their combat over Helen, the *Iliad* notes that ‘any one’ of the Greeks and Trojans who became the witnesses to this duel would make the following supplication to Zeus:

Father Zeus, ruling from Ida’s height, greatest and most glorious: whichever of the two it was that brought these troubles on our peoples, grant that he be killed and sink down to the house of Hades, and we make between us a solemn truce of friendship.

(Homer 1987: 49: 3)¹²

The assembly here includes Achilles and Hektor, who between them measure out the ground for the combat and shake lots in a bronze helmet to decide the first attack. In the movie, however, particular episodes are used to reinforce a dramatic distinction between religious and more secular viewpoints. In a council of war, the Trojans are shown discussing the

11. All excerpts from movies transcribed by the author.
12. This particular translation (Hammond 1987) has been chosen because it is an established, coherent and readily available *prose* version, and is thus preferable to either inferior or less familiar works, whether verse or prose.

likelihood of success in the forthcoming battle. The seer, or 'high priest' seems confident that the outcome will be favourable:

- Priest: I spoke to two farmers today. They saw an eagle flying with a serpent clutched in its talons. This is a sign from Apollo. We will win a great victory tomorrow.
- Hektor: Bird signs? You want to plan a strategy based on bird signs?
- Priam: Hektor, show respect. The high priest is a servant of Apollo.

In this excerpt, Hektor again assumes the role of a sceptic, attacking the status of the omen and reducing it to a random, natural phenomenon. In the movie narrative, Hektor has already been established as the practical, mature and level-headed realist. In an earlier appearance, in response to his brother's assertion that Poseidon had assisted their voyage from Sparta, he replied that 'the gods may bless you in the morning, and curse you in the afternoon'. This certainly recognizes the uncertain nature of divine aid, expressed in B. C. Dietrich's remark that 'the god's action is often sudden, momentary, and therefore only of passing value' (Dietrich 1965: 301).

Yet the incredulous reactions of Hektor to the priest's report, suggesting a fundamental mistrust of custom and religion, does not quite match his objections to the same incident in the *Iliad*. The contention does indeed turn on the value that should be accorded to a similar incident, but the passage itself makes a number of things clear. First, the appearance of the eagle is not mere hearsay, but a sight that is witnessed by the Trojan army just when its foremost warriors hesitate in their assault on the walls raised by the Achaians to protect their ships:

A bird-omen had appeared to them as they stood eager to cross, a soaring eagle which skirted the front of the army from right to left, holding in its talons a monstrous blood-red snake, alive and still struggling; and the snake had not yet lost its will to fight – it twisted back and struck at its captor on the breast beside the neck, and the eagle, stung by the pain, let it fall to the ground [...].

(Homer 1987: 193: 12)

In addition, the more complex event in the *Iliad* is interpreted in exactly the opposite manner from its presentation in the film; Poulydamas, a prominent warrior, advises Hektor that the sign should be understood as a warning, that the Trojans may well penetrate the Greek defences but will suffer heavy losses in so doing. It is Hektor who urges that the phenomenon be ignored and the attack pressed forward. He does indeed tell his interlocutor that the sign is meaningless, but answers to the effect that they should put their faith in Zeus 'who is king over all mortals and immortals' (Homer 1987: 194: 12). The remark that follows this declaration provides, I believe, an important cue for 'modern' interpretations of heroic agency, and is discussed below.

At this point, however, the notion of a distinct modern sensibility needs some clarification; it is based very much on what Jib Fowles (1996) called 'the project of the self', an attempt to make self-development and 'free'

choice within a competitive environment the ultimate goal of human energy. Collective values operate therefore not as norms to be admired but as sanctions that must be considered if the trajectory of the individual 'career' is not to run aground. In such a society, directive address (Price 2007) represents an authoritarian intervention closely attuned to the willingness of individuals to override sensible reservations in the service of their own advancement. As Slavoj Žižek says, individuals will 'tend to "rationalise" their "free" decision[s]' to obey exterior pressures (in this case, to accept humiliating challenges), by '*chang[ing] their opinion* about the act they were asked to accomplish' (Žižek 2001: 117, original emphasis). The world-view and practices of the characters who appear in the *Iliad* are clearly not shared by modern individuals, nor are they fully understood by those who produce cinematic versions like *Troy*; yet whatever the distortions apparent within the movie, it offers nonetheless a compelling portrayal of a collective social order.

Agency and structure

When Hektor responds to the dire warnings of Poulydamas, arguing that the Trojans should put their faith in Zeus, he follows this rebuke with another perspective, that 'one omen is best of all – to fight for your country' (Homer 1987: 194: 12). It is this kind of opinion which the movie translates into Hektor's moral code, notably in the brief oration he gives to the Trojans as they first rally to meet the Greek invasion:

All my life I've lived by a code, and the code is simple. Honour the gods, love your woman, and defend your country. Troy is mother to us all – fight for her!

In the short passage given above, Hektor appears as an *authoritative* speaker, an individual who, by virtue of his formal position as the son of King Priam, and through his reputation as a capable warrior, has the right to exercise power. This power is not merely directed outward, against the Greek army, but is also revealed in the internal arrangements of gendered behaviour, where the code or edict orders the man to love 'his' woman, placing the female subject in a subordinate role. The ease with which modern adaptation displays retrogressive gender roles as normal is easily attributed to the dramatization of 'the past', where such arrangements are supposed to be uncontroversial. In this way, responsibility for creating unchallenged assumptions is avoided by the film-maker. In his role as the foremost representative of a patriarchal warrior caste in which wealth, including female 'trophies', is secured through military conquest, Hektor appears therefore to act as a decisive force. His *agency*, the active production of effects, is, however, constrained and directed by the context in which he operates.

This is the requirement to wage war in the name of patriotism and honour, but which all participants know at heart to be a dispute between two individuals. The first point therefore, is that both film and book recognize the inherently contradictory and tragic situation in which Hektor's activity as an agent is produced. He operates within pre-existing structures (a military and religious hierarchy) from which his actions are temporally differentiated or, in plain terms, are 'out of sync' with larger social forces

13. Zizek argues that 'religious belief [...] is not merely, or even primarily, an inner conviction', and notes that 'an institution and its rituals [...] stand for the very mechanisms that generate it [...] the implicit logic of his argument is: kneel down and *you shall believe that you knelt down because of your belief*' (Zizek 1999: 66, original emphasis).
14. Hammond observes that composition in this context meant not only the production of original material but also 'the adaptation, elaboration or conflation of songs learned from other performers' (Hammond 1987: viii).

(Archer 1995 cited in Shilling 1997: 740). The prince, like all social actors, however prominent, finds himself in a role that is not entirely of his making, and cannot necessarily produce timely responses which meet current contingencies; instead, actions designed to resolve one situation may actually initiate other 'structured' outcomes which lead to greater difficulty. We should note that he explains that he follows a code, not that he regards its contents as a set of incontrovertible beliefs.¹³

Hektor must behave according to the expectations set out in a social code that pre-dates his arrival in the world, and which he nonetheless has come to represent. The more Hektor tries to fulfil the position of a *moral* military leader, the greater the tragic waste of the conflict. He is certainly conscious of his dilemma, but is unable to resolve it through argument or force. Hektor, in the terms set by Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, is an individual who acts within structures; as such, he must inevitably *follow rules* in order to draw on resources that then cannot help but reproduce the same structures (Shilling 1997: 740). In contrast, Paris' initiating action (reported in the *Iliad* but displayed in the film), the abduction of Helen, represents a misdeed that breaks the rules of hospitality and sets in motion a catastrophe.

The only 'recovery' of the situation is the sacrifice of not only individuals but an entire city, while the counterpoint to this is the opportunity for heroes to earn an 'immortality' based on the *heroic agency* which honourable combat multiplies into a seemingly endless slaughter. For the modern onlooker, this is all part of a spectacle that concentrates its emotional investment in leading characters while the 'extras' are rarely brought into focus as expressive actors.

In the case of Hektor, contradictory positions are offered; he is at times 'modern' and at other times more an honourable patriot, of a type which is easier to create in an imagined and legendary environment. The audience is invited to note the existence of fundamental, ageless passions when Odysseus is giving the speech which introduces the action, asking if the actions of the heroes will 'echo across the centuries', including how they fought and how 'fiercely' they loved, all in the context of 'an emerging Greek nation' that never appeared in the form suggested.

Inconsistencies, sensibility and the gods: conclusion

One common explanation for narrative inconsistencies and contradictions within the *Iliad* is essentially historical, based on the notion that the production of an uneven text is inevitable given its genesis in a process of oral composition¹⁴ which began in the late Bronze Age (Sherratt 1992: 145). The unfulfilled subplots, elisions and abrupt reversals of fortune that characterize the narrative provide an important insight not just into the conditions of its long 'gestation' as a narrative, but into the persistence of formulaic description. It is hardly surprising, for example, that commentators have noted 'the usefulness of the gods as a functional device' (Emlyn-Jones 1992: 93). The appearance of gods, often assuming a disguised and *misleading* identity, may contradict modern expectations of narrative consistency, especially where they intervene to rescue various heroes by enveloping them in a mist (Emlyn-Jones 1992: 93). Hektor, for example, is encouraged to face Achilles by Athene, who assumes the role

of the warrior Deiphobos and assures him that he will not fight the Greek hero alone.

The act of regulating a text without sacrificing the traditional references that listeners expect to encounter would suggest the survival of elements that a purely *logical* development of spatial and temporal data might discard.¹⁵ This does not quite explain the survival of outright contradictions, which Elizabeth S. Sherratt believes owes more to the 'archaeology' of the *Iliad* (1992: 148); in other words, its composition over centuries remains a testament to historical development. So, for example, the contradictory use of spears in the poem, sometimes employed in the archaic manner as single weapons for close-quarter fighting, at others used purely as missiles, reflects the different periods which contributed to the action; the problem is then to find a means of re-supplying heroes whose weapons have left their hands. The solution is easily found – a god must return the spear to its owner (Sherratt 1992: 149). The challenge faced by the cinematic 'auteur' is different in one important respect; although all narrative propositions will rationalize the material they display, the choice of emphasis for a modern audience is partially dictated by its familiarity with only the barest outlines of 'Greek myth'.

Although dedicated to the display of recognizable hierarchies and gender-roles, Petersen's *Troy*, unlike the more strident *300*, is nonetheless inevitably still *social*, a drama of collective endeavour placed in a troubled universe of fateful outcomes. Latacz follows this thematic approach, arguing that 'the main emphasis and thus the meaning of the *Iliad*' is a representation of 'a far-reaching conflict over ethical standards and its fateful consequences for a coalition' and in this sense is 'not the story of the Trojan War' (Latacz 2004: 183–184). These disputes over ethics represent what Latacz sees as an attempt to provide an answer to the 'unresolved problem' of defining the role of an aristocratic faction within a changing social order (2004: 183–184).

Unable, however, to depend on the mobilization of public interest through anything more than a superficial knowledge of the Homeric and historical context, *Troy* must re-tell the myth, yet tailor this to 'multiplex' expectations. At the same time, the 'adaptation of source' is in one sense curiously productive; the extensive use of CGI effects is reserved for the depiction of human activity, and in itself reveals the movie's priorities, which are devoted to the delineation of human values and are consistent with a more rational perspective on belief. While the protagonists reveal an acute consciousness of divine intervention, the gods (apart from the nymph Thetis, not one of the 'immortals') do not appear on-screen but instead loom large as a *form of consciousness*. When Margaret Archer repeats Auguste Comte's observation that the 'majority of the actors are the dead' (cited in Shilling 1997: 740), this might extend to the pan-Hellenic figures who continued to provide exemplars for their living descendants. In their own conflation of heroic and hoplite combat, for instance, the Greeks who faced the Persian invasion of 480 BCE were still in debt to their mythical ancestors (Lendon 2005: 46).

The process of attribution, described in the introduction as the investment of objects, persons, or entire societies, with particular qualities, is thus not in the final analysis solely a modern phenomenon. Ancient

15. See Branigan for a critical assessment of theories of narrative which advocate the existence of a 'cause-effect relationship' (Branigan 1992: 27).

conceptions of the character and function of individual deities represented an important component of a shared understanding, not simply of the 'divine', but of a social structure that depended on the successful exercise of certain types of public conduct. Forms of citizenship in the fifth-century city-state or *polis* were expressed as much through religious observance and ritual as they were within the formal requirements of political life.

The citizens of Athens regarded themselves as *autochthonous*, not only indigenous but belonging to a lineage that had sprung from the earth after the encounter between Athena and Hephaestus. The Spartans, for their part, traced their lineage to the demi-god Herakles. Such beliefs had clear benefits, in providing a rationale for the constitution of communal rights and identities, but they were nonetheless sincere; that is to say, their function can be appreciated without characterizing them as entirely a matter of political calculation. The distinction between ancient 'textual-social' and modern *cinematic* approaches to myth and the gods may be understood as the difference between a genuine system of belief, deployed for instrumental purposes, and a system of representation that must provide limited *narrative* explanations for the cultural formations it brings to the screen.

Whereas *300* attributes Spartan power to simple muscular determination and military skill, presenting its priesthood as sinister charlatans, *Troy* retains some sense of the relationship between human beings and those customs and beliefs that animate their actions. *Troy* does indeed provide a 'rational' explanation for all manner of incidents and events, from failure in battle to the death of Achilles (the Greek hero, hit by many arrows, breaks off each in turn, except the one that protrudes from his heel). Such rationalizations, especially the sceptical attitude assigned to Hektor, may well acknowledge the particular limits of modern credulity, and certainly indicates a spurious distinction between practical 'men of action' and a caste of religious leaders. Nonetheless, *Troy's* Petersen is cautious enough to present such positions as troubled interventions in a social order that is, despite the material absence of the gods, founded on genuine belief in their power. In this sense at least, *Troy* allows the articulation of a sensibility that allows some understanding of ancient culture and its discontents.

Works cited

- Branigan, Edward (1992), *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Burkert, Walter (1985), *Greek Religion*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Campbell, Jan (2005), *Film and Cinema Spectatorship*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Danek, Georg (2007), 'The Story of Troy Through the Centuries', in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Troy: From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic*, Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell, 68–84.
- Davies, J. K. (1993), *Democracy and Classical Greece* (2nd ed.), London: Fontana.
- Detienne, Marcel (2005), *The Greeks and Us*, Cambridge: Polity.
- de Polignac, François (1995), *Cults, Territory and the Origins of the Greek City-state*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- de Souza, Philip, Heckel, Waldemar and Llewellyn-Jones, Lloyd (2004), *The Greeks at War*, Oxford: Osprey.
- Dietrich, B. C. (1965), *Death, Fate and the Gods*, University of London: Athlone Press.

- Emlyn-Jones, Chris (1992), 'The Homeric Gods: Poetry, Belief and Authority', in Emlyn-Jones, Chris, Hardwick, Lorna and Purkis, John (1992), *Homer: Readings and Images*, London, Milton Keynes: Duckworth, Open University, 90–103.
- Epps, Preston H. (1933), 'Fear in Spartan Character', *Classical Philology*, 28:1, 12–29.
- Fowels, Jib (1996), *Advertising and Popular Culture*, Thousand Oaks, London, Delhi: Sage.
- Garner, Richard (1990), *From Homer to Tragedy*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Golden, Mark and Toohey, Peter (1997), *Inventing Ancient Culture*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Greetham, David C. (1999), *Theories of the Text*, Oxford and New York: Oxford.
- Herodotus (2003), *The Histories* (trans. A. de Selincourt and J. Marincola), London: Penguin Books.
- Hodkinson, Stephen (2007), 'Spartan Existence', *Vision* (Nottingham University Research Magazine), Issue 6, 1–3.
- Homer (1987), *Iliad* (trans. Martin Hammond), London: Penguin.
- Latacz, Joachim (2004), *Troy and Homer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lendon, J. E. (2005), *Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity*, New Haven and London: Yale.
- Matthews, Rupert (2006), *The Battle of Thermopylae: A Campaign in Context*, Stroud: Spellmount.
- Morris, Ian MacGregor (2000), 'To Make a New Thermopylae: Hellenism, Greek Liberation, and the Battle of Thermopylae', *Greece and Rome*, 47:2 (October), 211–230.
- Osborne, Robin (2004), *Greek History*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Parker, Robert (1996), *Athenian Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Powell, Anton (1988), *Athens and Sparta*, London: Routledge.
- Pozzi, Dora and Wickersham, John (1991), *Myth and the Polis*, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Price, Stuart (1996), *Communication Studies*, Harlow: Longman.
- Price, Stuart (2007), *Discourse Power Address*, Aldershot, Burlington: Ashgate.
- Sherratt, Elizabeth S. (1992), 'Reading the Texts: Archaeology and the Homeric Question in Homer', in Emlyn-Jones, Chris, Hardwick, Lorna and Purkis, John (eds), *Homer: Readings and Images*, London, Milton Keynes: Duckworth, Open University, 144–165.
- Shilling, Chris (1997), 'The Undersocialised Conception of the Embodied Agent in Modern Sociology', *Sociology*, 31:4 (November), 737–754.
- Strassler, Robert B. (1988), 'The Harbour at Pylos, 425 BC', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 108, 198–203.
- Strassler, Robert B. (1990), 'The Opening of the Pylos Campaign', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 110, 110–125.
- Strauss, Barry S. (1997), 'The Problem of Periodization: The Case of the Peloponnesian War', in Golden, M. and Toohey, P. (eds), *Inventing Ancient Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 165–175.
- Therborn, Goran (1980), *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, London: Verso.
- Whelehan, Imelda (1999), 'Adaptation: The Contemporary Dilemmas', in Cartmell, Deborah and Whelehan, Imelda (eds), *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, London and New York: Routledge, 3–19.
- Wickersham, John and Pozzi, Dora (1991), *Myth and the Polis*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Zizek, Slavoj (1999), 'The Spectre of Ideology', in Wright, Elizabeth and Wright, Edmond (eds), *The Zizek Reader*, Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 53–86.

Zizek, Slavoj (2001), *On Belief*, London and New York: Routledge.

Filmography

300 (2007), dir. Zack Snyder.

The 300 Spartans (1961), dir. Rudolph Maté.

Troy (2004), dir. Wolfgang Petersen.

Suggested citation

Price, S. (2008), 'Displacing the Gods? Agency and Power in Adaptations of Ancient History and Myth', *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 1: 2, pp. 117–132, doi: 10.1386/jafp.1.2.117/1

Contributor details

Dr Stuart Price is Principal Lecturer in Media and Cultural Production at De Montfort University. His published work includes articles on political authority, news discourses, the 'war on terror' and cultural formations in antiquity. He is the author of *Discourse Power Address* (2007).

Contact: De Montfort University, Clephan Building, Bonners Lane, Leicester LE2 1WE, UK.

E-mail: sprice@dmu.ac.uk

Mass-Market Comedy: How Mel Brooks Adapted *The Producers* for Broadway, and Made a Billion Dollars 2001–2007

Alex Symons *University of Nottingham*

Abstract

Studies carried out by Susan Bennett (1997), Jonathan Burston (1998) and Maurya Wickstrom (1999) suggest that American theatre has become a mass-culture business. This critique is now even more apparent given the current state of Broadway comedy – best exemplified by Mel Brooks's adaptations of his film The Producers (1968), including his Broadway show The Producers (2001) and his movie remake of that show, The Producers (2005). Brooks's original film may have been topical, shocking and full of controversy, but by 2001 those same old gags about Nazis, dumb blondes and homosexuals had become outdated. For this reason, the international acclaim of The Producers (2001) with theatre critics, as well as the critical backlash by many film critics, illustrates scholars' observations – namely that modern Broadway's mass audience is not necessarily interested in provocative or original comedy but applauds recycled jokes.

Keywords

Mel Brooks
The Producers
comedy
adaptation
Broadway
taste

F. Scott Fitzgerald said that there are no second acts in American life – he should have stuck around for the astonishing resurgence of Mel Brooks. It was at the tender age of 74 that Brooks traded in a five-decade career as a film and TV thigh-slapper to mount his first Broadway musical.

(Dawson 2005)

In her book *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (1997), Susan Bennett recounts the history of empirical research conducted into theatre audiences. According to Bennett, theatre audiences are not inclined towards innovation (1997: 89). Bennett suggests that because a higher level of education is typical of theatre's 'middle class' audiences, and because educational institutions mostly share the same social and artistic agendas, theatregoers expect 'traditional' theatre rather than avant-garde shows (1997: 89). Bennett also suggests theatre is subject to a form of creative censorship because of its increasing dependence on box office. Because of this, Bennett argues that theatre companies often 'cannot risk anything but the most popular works' (1997: 109), and that by result, many companies 'tend towards more conservative choices' (1997: 110). Rather than creative merit, publicity and marketability are becoming important factors in which shows get commissioned. In Bennett's view:

Another patch of little resistance is the choice of play already evaluated as a 'hit' through previous box-office success, and it is thus transferred, reproduced

in a different location, or revived. [...] In 1989, Joel Gray toured through the USA in a production of *Cabaret*; in this instance, the producers can rely not only on past success on Broadway and other stages, but on the enormous popularity of the movie and of Gray's performance to attract 'new' audiences into regional theatres.

(Bennett 1997: 112)

With these criticisms in mind, many theatre workers now consider mainstream theatre to be a mass culture business. In Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich's recent book *Theatre in Crisis?* (2002) the essays of many theatre-makers describe their concerns about the industry. As US theatre director Roberta Levitow elucidates, 'What comprises the majority of the work presented in the American theatre? Revivals, classics and some new work that generally steers clear of the controversial, politically or socially' (Levitow 2002: 26). Levitow suggests that due to theatre's appeal to mass audiences, shows are less experimental and less thought provoking. This criticism is reflected in the expectations of critics for theatre shows. Drama critic Michael Billington suggests that criticism of the theatre has become a celebrity-driven thumbs-up or thumbs-down practice – rather than the more complicated assessment of 'meaning' and 'purpose', which he suggests was typical back in the 1960s: 'Thirty years ago I would never have guessed that even the most serious papers would be assessing the value of works of art by visual symbols or star-ratings' (Billington 2002: 56). Billington blames the dumbing-down of theatre criticism on the 'consumerist culture' and 'the rise and rise of public relations' (2002: 57). According to Billington, the popularity of a theatre show is determined in advance by the popularity of the text, author, cast and crew – a popularity dictated by publicity.

Since mainstream theatre companies strive to reach the broadest possible audience, marketing strategies have assumed a prominence previously unseen in the industry. In her study of Disney's *The Lion King*, Maurya Wickstrom (1999) suggests that because the market for today's Broadway consists largely of tourists passing through New York, the advertisements are designed to reach an international audience, including those who typically do not go to the theatre, rather than the artistically-motivated group of locals it might once have relied on. As Wickstrom observes, 'In a globalized market, characterized by transnational competition and potentially world-wide reach, the industry can no longer rely on the old techniques of displaying goods as objects for purchase' (Wickstrom 1999: 285). Looking at examples of advertisements in New York's Time Square and inside the programme for the show, Wickstrom concludes that this kind of theatre relies on appealing to a mass audience using recognizable logos and gimmicks: 'The subordination of art to commerce is not only more powerful; it is more naturalized than ever' (1999: 298).

The effect of the mass culture industry on the production and consumption of art has also been documented by Celia Lury, in her book *Consumer Culture* (1996). Following the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Lury describes the phenomenon that traditionally lower classes are increasingly consuming goods with higher cultural value – something theorized as the 'new middle class' (Lury 1996: 117). Lury also notes that when

producers aspire to sell cultural commodities – such as Broadway shows – to this ever-broader market, they cater their works towards the competence or ‘aesthetic knowledge’ of the desired audience (1996: 79). Thus, because the content of new works alters according to popular demand, and the social constitution of the audience itself is broadening, this two-way process serves to blur the divide between high and low. As Lury underlines, there is speculation ‘that the lifestyle of the new middle classes is bringing about a change not only in what can be accumulated as cultural capital, but in the nature of the organization of the art-culture system as a whole’ (1996: 95). With its intended appeal beyond traditional Broadway, and its synchronic canonization by the critical community, Mel Brooks’s *The Producers* (2001) is a useful work with which to explore this further.

The effect of commercialization on production and consumption, as discussed by Lury, is nowhere more apparent than in the current state of conventional theatre comedy – best exemplified in the phenomenon of Mel Brooks’s Broadway show *The Producers* (2001). Firstly, the show is an adaptation rather than an original work, based on Brooks’s 1968 movie *The Producers* – described by *The Guardian* as a film with a ‘fanatical cult following’ (Nadelson 2005: 5). Also, Mel Brooks himself – the author of the show – was famous for his numerous works and appearances in film and television. As *The New Yorker* notes, ‘Brooks is a licensed zany. The paying customers know that he has the comic goods, and they giggle excitedly as the curtain goes up even before there is anything remotely funny onstage’ (Lahr 2001). For theatre critics, given Brooks’s fame, the popularity of the show was already assured. As *The Guardian* succinctly puts it, ‘from the second it opened in New York in 2001, the stage musical was a critical, popular, financial and iconic hit’ (Nadelson 2005: 5). Thanks to the press coverage, public interest in the show was frenzied from the start. When it opened on Broadway, *The Producers* broke all records for ticket sales – making three million dollars within the first day (Cox 2007), leading the *New York Post* to describe *The Producers* as ‘a cast-iron, copper-bottomed, superduper, mammoth old-time Broadway hit’ (Barnes 2001).

According to *Variety*, public demand for *The Producers* in New York ‘created the phenomenon of the premium-priced ticket’ (Cox 2007). Notably, the Broadway show opened at a ticket price of \$99, in a week when *Rent* (1996) was priced at \$80, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1988) was charging \$85, and *The Lion King* (1997) \$90.¹ Even so, tickets for *The Producers* kept climbing, peaking at \$480 (Cox 2007). After its opening in Chicago, and the successful New York run, *The Producers* was exported with success to London in 2004, Australia (Parish 2001: 279), South Korea, and reached Tel Aviv in 2006. As of February 2007 *Variety* records that the show ‘raked in more than \$1 billion in worldwide ticket sales’ (Cox 2007).

The Producers had a wide appeal because the public, and not just regular theatregoers, knew what to expect: namely performances similar to that of Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder in the popular 1968 movie – wherever and whenever they were audience to it. This mass-culture practice has been studied by Tori Haring-Smith (2002), who observes that while cinema plays to many cities worldwide at the same time, theatre has begun to

1. See ‘The Producers 2005’, Box Office Mojo. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=producers.htm>. Accessed 11 April 2005. ‘Week 47: April 16–22 2001’, Legit Weekly Box Office. *Variety* www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=legit_chart&page=legit47&dept=Legit. Accessed 21 April 2007.

do so too. For example, the musical *Rent* played in London, New York and Chicago simultaneously, and she suggests that ‘all productions are designed to deliver the same show. New actors must pick up the same intentions, actions and timing as previous actors’ (Haring-Smith 2002: 101). Rather than offering an individual performance as a product of its regional community, this type of theatre arguably attempts to imitate characteristics of cinema: ‘when cast members must duplicate some other actors’ performances, not develop their own, they become automatons, no more alive than the projections of light on a cinema screen’ (Haring-Smith 2002: 101). This statement evokes a criticism of the theatre audience, and Haring-Smith goes so far as to suggest that audiences come to theatre shows with rigid expectations: ‘Our modern society craves predictability, permanence, and universality. [...] Perhaps theatre is dying because it cannot be predictable enough. [...] You can’t out-cinema cinema. And theatre must not try’ (2002: 101).

During *The Producers*’ run the cast members changed many times; this proved to be an ongoing source of publicity whereby newspapers often speculated on the casting of the show. For example, *USA Today* (Gardner 2001) quoted Marc Hirschfeld, executive vice president of casting for NBC Entertainment, who suggested that many stars were being considered for the roles. These included personalities as varied as Martin Short, Jason Alexander, Kevin Kline, and Danny DeVito as Max Bialystock. For the role of Leo Bloom, he named David Schwimmer, David Hyde Pierce, *3rd Rock From the Sun* star French Stewart and Dana Carvey (Gardner 2001). The show’s actual players were just as varied. In 2007, working-class comedian Peter Kay featured as occasional guest star in the role of Roger DeBris during the UK national tour, and television actor David Hasselhoff played Roger DeBris in Las Vegas (Scherzer 2007). This variety of stars titillated critics because they expected the performances to be very similar to those of the original film’s actors. Amongst these many stars, the show’s most unusual choice must be Italian-American star of sitcoms *Who’s the Boss?* and *Taxi*, Tony Danza, in the role of Bialystock. His casting was seen as an unlikely choice, much to the entertainment of *The New York Times*:

Max Bialystock is many things – a stinking liar, a crook, a shameless noodge, a stud muffin for the elderly and infirm. And of course a big fat Broadway producer. But a mensch he is not. This incontrovertible fact has apparently not been imparted to Tony Danza, who is struggling gamely through this gargantuan role at the moment, treating audiences to a soft and chewy sweetheart of a Bialy.

(Isherwood 2007)

Danza’s slender build contrasted so much with the heavy frame of Zero Mostel in the role of Bialystock that the script had to be altered to accommodate him. *The New York Times* also observes, ‘Now, when Leo Bloom, played with zest by Roger Bart, descends into one of his many bouts of hysteria and hisses venom at Max, he abuses his partner as a “former fatty”’ (Isherwood 2007). By making a point of Danza’s build, his full head of hair and his likeable persona – all unlike Zero Mostel – the article

contrasts Danza's performance with expectations set by the 1968 movie. In short, these differences made Danza the most unsuitable actor for the role so far.

Perhaps the most controversial casting, however, was Richard Dreyfus, who was also picked to play Bialystock – despite the fact that Dreyfus had no stage or singing experience. Dreyfus withdrew from the show four days before opening night, notably after making a 'gaffe' on the *Frank Skinner Show*, in which, talking about his lack of practice, he warned audiences, 'The Producers opens November 9. Come from Christmas on. Do not come before that, OK? The general manager just had a heart attack when I said that' (Reynolds 2004). Despite such debatable casting decisions, the continuing success of the production was assured because the show was not dependent on any one actor's interpretation of the role. As *The New York Times* reports, 'The Producers is a comic machine sturdy enough to power ahead even if a cylinder or two is idling' (Isherwood 2007).

Although the roles of Max Bialystock and Leo Bloom were not exclusively associated with any particular stars, some actors in the show were certainly perceived to be more successful than others. As reported in the *Telegraph*, British actor Henry Goodman was 'sacked by Brooks after 30 performances for not being funny enough' (Reynolds 2004). In contrast, the most popular performers proved to be its first players, Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick – something reflected in both the critical press and the ticket sales. For example, when *The Guardian* remarks that *The Producers* ran for three years on Broadway without an unprofitable week (Hickling 2004), it also adds, '[W]hen the original stars, Matthew Broderick and Nathan Lane, left the show[,] attendances dropped. But a show that had been grossing \$1.2m a week was still fairly comfortable at \$900,000' (Hickling 2004). By looking at the reviews, however, it seems that the success of Lane and Broderick's performances was not due to their own distinctive interpretation of the roles, but simply to their physical likeness to the 1968 film's stars. As such, their performances best met audience expectations for the show as advertised. Certainly Lane benefited from his physical resemblance to the late Zero Mostel, and had already replaced him in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, in a 1996 revival of Mostel's 1962 show. However, his performance was also under the greatest scrutiny. As *The Guardian* summarizes, 'The Producers relies heavily upon the interplay of its two leads, however, and finding an actor with sufficient stamina to carry the role of Max has been a continual problem' (Hickling 2004). Similarly, *The New Yorker* comments, 'As good as he is, Lane can't quite find the oily desperation that Zero Mostel brought to the film role or escape the shadow of Mostel's comic genius' (Lahr 2001).

Where Brooks did adapt the story of *The Producers*, he did so to meet the expectations of Broadway audiences for musical numbers. Musical theatre relies on rigid structures and strict conventions especially at the high-price end of the industry. For example, Mark Fortier writes about 'the effect of high commodification on recent musical theatre' (Fortier 1997: 108). He suggests that theatrical musicals like Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* (1988) and Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1994) are 'more economically and technically endowed and more profitable and yet more precarious and directly susceptible to market forces than ever

2. This line is transcribed from *The Producers* (1968).
3. These and subsequent lines are transcribed from the movie *The Producers* (2005). Although performances can vary, I have heard these lines delivered in *The Producers* theatre show touring at the Palace Theatre in Manchester, United Kingdom (2007), and at the Bushnell Theatre in Hartford, United States of America (2008).
4. A similar case in point is 'The Addressing of Cats' finale at the end of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*, which ran on Broadway from 1982 to 2000.

before – a theatre that sells out in a number of senses' (Fortier 1997: 108). In the case of such high-price-ticket musicals, regular audiences expect certain kinds of numbers at certain points in the narrative – which together determine the structure of the show. In his analysis of this trend Jonathan Burston goes so far as to suggest such big-investment shows are so highly standardized that they belong to a unique genre all of their own – namely a category he calls 'megamusicals' (Burston 1998: 205). Burston claims:

Unlike their predecessors, megamusicals are big global business: capital investments are larger, markets are bigger, more international and more numerous, and stakes are higher than ever before in the history of popular music-theatre production. In addition, with the arrival of megamusicals we have also witnessed the attainment of a level of standardisation in production regimes previously unknown in the field of the live theatre.

(1998: 205)

For *The Producers* to create a broadly appealing musical, Mel Brooks made some striking changes to his original story. Near the end of the 1968 movie, Bialystock and Bloom are arrested together for overselling investment in the *Springtime for Hitler* production. In the 2001 show, however, only Bialystock is caught. Bloom runs away to Rio with his secretary Ulla, leaving Bialystock in jail. At this point, trapped in his dramatically lit jail cell, Bialystock performs the solo 'Betrayed'. While fans of the original movie watching the show may find this plot twist an innovative change, it is in fact a convention in musical theatre. For the show, this new twist was necessary to justify Bialystock performing a song referred to as the 'eleven o'clock number' (Stroman 2005) – an emotional number, traditionally used to lift the audience's spirits at this late point in evening shows.

In the final scene of the 1968 movie, Bialystock and Nazi-helmeted Franz Liebkind are seen in jail together, conducting a string of prisoners in a seedy jailhouse production called 'Prisoners of Love'. Bloom is sat at a desk, overselling the production to other cons and a prison guard: 'Tell the governor he owns one hundred per cent of the show.'² However, in the 2001 theatre production, this melancholy finish is not the end of the story. Instead, a messenger runs into the scene, and reads a telegram from the governor: 'Gentleman, you are hereby granted a full pardon for having – through song and dance – brought joy and laughter into the heart of every murderer, rapist and sex maniac in Sing Sing!'³ The next sequence is a glitzy big Broadway version of the same 'Prisoners of Love' performance – lit with pink lighting, rows of chorus girls each twirling a prop ball and chain in unison. This time, Ulla even appears centre stage with Roger DeBris. Here, all the leads are united again in a legitimate Broadway success, closing the show with the uplifting number that theatre audiences have come to expect.⁴

The mass-culture criticism of *The Producers*, and the general passivity of its audience, becomes most clear when the show is considered within the specific context of comedy. By putting Nazism into a glamorous Broadway musical, *The Producers* (1968) shocked audiences and in doing so opened up a debate as to how the Nazis should, or rather could, be portrayed in

comedy. In the years since, however, attitudes have changed. There have been many popular comedies that joke about the Nazis and spoof Hitler, ranging from UK television series *'Allo 'Allo!* (1982–1992) to Mel Brooks's own film *To Be or Not to Be* (1983) and Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (1997). These have been so commonly written about that *The New York Times* has since coined the term 'Nazi Kitsch' (Mendelsohn 2001). As such, taboos surrounding the representation of National Socialism in popular culture were long forgotten, and by the time the show opened in 2001 there was nothing edgy or provocative in Brooks's old concept. Again, some changes made from the film to the theatre show make this especially apparent. In the 1968 film, Bialystock and Bloom are made to wear swastika armbands by Liebkind in order to secure the *Springtime for Hitler* script. On leaving Liebkind's apartment, they immediately dump the bands in a trash can and spit on them. In 1968, even wearing the bands was considered too much for critics. For example, *The Village Voice* points out that 'Brooks tries to play it both ways by having Wilder spit on the swastikas after they are deposited in a trash basket, but it is too late. [...] I simply cannot believe any Jewish producers would involve themselves in such a project even for a million dollars' (Sarris 1977b: 116). In contrast, in the 2001 theatre show Bialystock and Bloom forget to take the bands off when they leave, and are still wearing them when they reach the home of the show's director Roger DeBris. On entering Roger's apartment, Carmen Ghia asks the two for their hats, coats... and swastikas. Bialystock exclaims, 'Oh these! We were just at a rally. Everybody was wearing them.'

Compared to the critical outrage which met the 1968 movie, this scene – which takes Bialystock and Bloom's compliance with National Socialism one step further – demonstrates how attitudes have changed. For example, according to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, 'Originally a wacky, somewhat dangerous satire, *The Producers* is now more of an uncensored love letter to everything wild and wonderful and desperate about Broadway – a sort of naughty Jewish boy's version of "42nd Street"' (Weiss 2001). Similarly, *The New York Review of Books* notes, '*The Producers* risks absolutely nothing; there's nothing at stake anymore. Brooks's new musical has smoothly processed his movie, whose greatest virtue was its anarchic, grotesque energy, into a wholly safe evening' (Mendelsohn 2001). In a similar vein, *The New York Times* contends, 'For a production that makes a point of being tasteless, *The Producers* exudes a refreshing air of innocence. In fact, ardent fans of the film, which starred Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder, may feel it has been defanged' (Brantley 2001). Even though many reviews admitted that Brooks's 2001 show was a mild comedy – or a show without any controversy –, critics were still entertained. Because of the very fact that *The Producers* was without the political relevance that once made it so divisive, Brooks's 2001 show was now a universally appealing 'family' event.

As the outrage of some film critics over Brooks's first *The Producers* (1968) made very clear, controversial comedy can potentially alienate certain audience groups. No such commercial risk was taken with *The Producers* (2001). The harmlessness of the show's old Nazi-comedy – and the show's universal marketability – is demonstrated best by its favourable reception with Jewish audiences. For example, when acclaiming the show's comedy, a Jewish reviewer for the *New York Post* quips, 'Speaking as someone

who 61 years ago was possibly only 22 miles of water and a rather good Air Force away from becoming a bar of soap, I did not find it offensive' (Barnes 2001). More significantly, the show was successfully exported to Israel. As the Middle East correspondent for *The Times* reports, '*The Producers* in Tel Aviv takes the biscuit' (Farrell 2006). In describing the performance *The Times* remarks, 'The show, in Hebrew but replete with swastikas and Nazi salutes, is playing nightly in Tel Aviv to chuckling audiences of Holocaust survivors. Even as they chat during the interval about the best lines from *A Gay Musical with Adolf and Eva*, many recall the horror of Kristallnacht' (Farrell 2006).

In 2005, Brooks produced a film version of his musical. In an effort to capture the Broadway production – its new numbers, actors and the old New York created for the show – Brooks hired the show's choreographer and director Susan Stroman to direct, even though she lacked any film experience. At Brooks's request, Stroman even adopted the head-to-toe framing style familiar in screen musicals like the 1952 *Singin' in the Rain* (Mohr 2005: 6). Brooks's many promotional statements suggest the film was conceived in order to allow a wider audience to see the Broadway show – making the assumption that film audiences would share his adoration of the theatre production. For example, in an interview with *Film Review*, Brooks describes his idea for the film.

Now, we were making the musical CD back in 2001, before we opened, and I scream out, 'Stro, this has gotta be a movie! Their performances are so brilliant and thrilling that I want to document it all forever, even if we just shoot it on a handheld video camera.' So we made the movie.

(Anon 2006b: 34)

Brooks was not alone in thinking the Broadway show would be just as successful as a film. Early reports about *The Producers* (2005) presumed that the picture was Oscar material. According to *Empire*, '[T]heir chances of striking box-office and awards gold are high as a showgirl's heel' (Anon 2005: 85). *The Times* asserts that 'Thurman, a certifiable wow, is now being talked up for the Oscars' (Dawson 2005). Reviewers expected that the big following of *The Producers* on Broadway would carry over to the new movie. For example, *Screen International* suggests that 'Given the crowd-pleasing material and its large fan base, it should skew toward the more optimistic levels of returns in the US' (Brent 2005: 36). Despite this critical anticipation, the film-of-the-show turned out to be a flop.

When released, *The Producers* never received a nomination from the Academy, and its commercial reception was very poor. Brooks's film took \$19.4m in the United States and \$18.7m in foreign theatres. The film thus recouped only \$38m worldwide (Stroman 2005) of its original \$45m cost (Anon 2006b: 34). By recording the theatre show as a film, Brooks did expose a new audience to his production. However, the audience of this film had, arguably, quite different and possibly more sophisticated expectations compared to the audience of the live Broadway musical. The press reaction was one of great disappointment, made worse by great surprise at the celebrated show's poor transition to film. For example, *The Independent* reviews the 2005 movie as follows:

One might suppose that this golden egg, hatched to a great fanfare on Broadway with Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick as its stars, would carry over some of its lustre to the big screen and dazzle audiences all over again. Well, it probably seemed a good idea at the time – unfortunately, the egg has gone rotten in transit, and the whiff hits you within 10 minutes.

(Quinn 2005: 89)

Unfortunately, Mel Brooks's *Producers* show – which was considered a delight by theatre critics universally – was a total miss with most film critics. This failure to translate his show into a movie evoked speculation that *The Producers* was now better suited to the theatre than to film. For instance, the critic of *The Independent* argues, 'Whatever magic you felt *The Producers* conjured on the stage, cherish the memory; you won't find anything like it here' (Quinn 2005: 89). *The Producers* (2005) movie was considered unsuccessful by several critics who thought it failed to live up to expectations set by the original 1968 picture – let alone contemporary movies. A concise opinion was published in *Empire*: 'As a chance to see the celebrated Broadway show with the original cast, this is a treat. As a re-interpretation of a classic, though, it's a disappointment' (Anon 2006a: 57). In many reviews, Brooks's idea to sell his Broadway show to film audiences was considered a major error – typically described by *The Independent* as 'hopelessly muddled and misconceived' (Quinn 2005: 89).

The failure of the show-as-film may be due to the apparent differences in expectation between critics of the *Producers* film and the theatre show. Whereas the Broadway audience were delighted by the 'revival' of old comedy, the film critics were not as easily impressed. For many film critics, 'spoofing' Brooks's own pictures – including reproducing *The Producers* (1968) – and a selection of Broadway shows was not enough. Instead, they perceived his new movie as a step too far, imitating old material – rather than creating something new – and worst of all, trying to make yet another buck out of this already successful megamusical. These criticisms were detrimental to Brooks's reputation – a sentiment captured by *The Sunday Times*: 'I wonder what purpose has been served by this screen remake, beyond the potential broadening of financial rewards' (McCartney 2006: 20). The backlash against Brooks, however, was most overt in the *Village Voice* review, which made a point of the film's production history. According to its review of the 2005 film:

There's no business like show business, and the musical *Producers*' considerable success showed the original movie to have been prophetic – of itself. Thus, *The Producers* has mutated into a story of self-actualization. Is there a Saturday-morning cartoon series in Max and Leo's future? *The Producers: The Musical: The Movie* insists, even as it demonstrates, that the show must go on ... and on.

(Hoberman 2005)

In the coverage of *The Producers* (2005), film critics were often not disappointed merely because Brooks's show consisted of recycled material – but because it was now without the political relevance it once had. Certainly the film's humour was in some way topical when Brooks's original was

released in 1968. In a climate of emerging feminism, and with gay culture only making its first moves into the mainstream, critics were taken aback. Typically, *The Village Voice* accused Brooks of adding 'a grotesque dimension to contemporary sexism' (Sarris 1977a: 137), and the *Motion Picture Herald* noted, 'Because of the openness of the portrayals of the two homosexuals, [...] the picture should not be called a family film' (Buchanan 1968: 757). However, attitudes have since moved on, and just like Brooks's Nazi-comedy, neither the representation of 'bimbos' nor extroverted homosexuals inspire anything like the same controversy.

These old-fashioned stereotypes may have entertained Broadway audiences, but many film critics were appalled by this outdated and entirely innocuous material. This attitude is apparent in a *New York Times* review of the movie, 'Some of the big laugh lines have been provoking groans since the first, non-musical *Producers* movie way back in 1968, and probably even longer, since even that film was a fond, nostalgic embrace of a dying show business tradition' (Scott 2005). As this criticism suggests, film critics exhibit higher expectations for originality and shock in their comedy than theatre-goers. While many reviews identify the difference in tastes between film and theatre, this criticism is made most evident in the *New York Times* review. The review outright condemns theatre-comedy as inferior to film, '[I]t may take a faithful rendering on-screen to reveal the real essence of *The Producers* in its musical incarnation – its vulgarity, its cynicism, its utter lack of taste, charm or wit' (Scott 2005). Most savage of all, *The New York Times* also credited Brooks's new-found popularity, not to his own renewed ability to make original and shocking comedy, but on the complacent tastes of Broadway audiences:

I don't just mean that the show's retrograde humor – drooling over show-girls, sending up antiquated homosexual stereotypes – is offensive. The intention seems to be simultaneously to mock that kind of humor and to enjoy it, as if you could double your laughter that way. Perhaps onstage you could, but that speaks less to the vitality of Mr Brooks's imagination than to the terminal morbidity of the Broadway musical.

(Scott 2005)

In Lury's terms, the inversion of tastes revealed by Brooks's adaptations adds new evidence to the complicated evolution of this 'art-culture system' (Lury 1996: 95). In this context, the snobbery of film critics regarding *The Producers* (2005) – and the popularity of *The Producers* (2001) with modern Broadway audiences both critically and commercially – suggests that the traditional boundaries between theatre and film, so-called high art and low art, have certainly become blurred. As a result, the 2005 movie seems to have been treated with more critical rigour than the theatre performance. The complexity of the organization of the art-culture system Lury refers to becomes apparent in this example, where a Broadway musical is more popular and popular than a film version of an acclaimed comedy classic.

The tendency of different opinion between film and theatre critics in this study further illustrates observation about the theatre industry and its audience as noted by Bennett (1997). Firstly, *The Producers* (2001) tapped into a differently constituted audience, revealing a vast number of people

perhaps not familiar with Broadway but eager to watch a famous 'cult' movie replayed on stage. In their acclaim of *The Producers*, it seems this extended Broadway market applauds predictable, formulaic stories in this form of live entertainment. Mel Brooks's tired comedy material of sexist humour, Nazi-kitsch and gay jokes appeals to this vast audience. In contrast, the majority of film critics, who criticized the new version of *The Producers* (2005) severely, demonstrate an interest only in original and more controversial material – comedy of cultural worth that requires its audience to reconsider social and political pretensions, even at the risk of alienating members of the audience. The Broadway musical, through the commercialization and globalization of its production and consumption, is in this case revealed to be an increasingly less provocative medium. With Brooks's second comedy show currently running on Broadway – a musical version of his 1974 movie *Young Frankenstein* – this trend looks certain to continue.

Works cited

- Anon (2005), '54 Films For Your Consideration: 9 *The Producers*', *Empire* 197, 1 November, p. 85.
- Anon (2006a), 'In Cinemas: *The Producers*', *Empire*, 200, 1 February, p. 57.
- Anon (2006b), 'News: From Screen to Stage to Screen: Mel Brooks on the Life of *The Producers*', *Film Review*, 200, 1 February, p. 34.
- Barnes, Clive (2001), 'Springtime for B'way', *New York Post*, 20 April, <http://www.producersonbroadway.com/>. Accessed 12 April 2007.
- Bennett, Susan (1997), *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, London: Routledge.
- Billington, Michael (2002), 'The State of Reviewing Today', in Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich (eds), *Theatre in Crisis?: Performance Manifestos for a New Century*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 54–57.
- Brantley, Ben (2001), '*The Producers*: A Scam That'll Knock 'Em Dead', *The New York Times*, 20 April, <http://www.producersonbroadway.com/>. Accessed 12 April 2007.
- Brent, Simon (2005), '*The Producers*', *Screen International*, 16 December, p. 36.
- Buchanan, Loren G. (1968), '*The Producers*', *Motion Picture Herald*, 238:1, p. 757.
- Burston, Jonathan (1998), 'Theatre Space as Virtual Place: Audio Technology, the Reconfigured Singing Body, and the Megamusical', *Popular Music*, 17: 2, 205–218.
- Cox, Gordon (2007), 'B'way *Producers* to Close: Brooks Tuner Will Shutter April 22', *Variety*, 22 February, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117959998.html?categoryid=1236&cs=1&query=mel+brooks>. Accessed 12 April 2007.
- Dawson, Jeff (2005), 'Having Triumphed on Stage, *The Producers* is Marching Back to the Big Screen – No Wonder Jeff Dawson Finds Mel Brooks So Full Of Beans', *The Times*, 18 December, http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/article766980.ece. Accessed 9 April 2005.
- Delgado, Maria M. and Svich, Caridad (eds) (2002), *Theatre in Crisis?: Performance Manifestos for a New Century*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Farrell, Stephen (2006), 'How Mel Brooks Created My Weirdest Middle East Moment', *Times*, 16 February, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article731373.ece. Accessed 9 April 2007.
- Fortier, Mark (1997), *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*, London, UK: Routledge.

- Gardner, Elysa (2001), 'New *Producers* Game: Guessing New Stars', *USA Today*, 6 June, <http://www.usatoday.com/life/theater/2001-06-06-producers.htm>. Accessed 9 April 2007.
- Haring-Smith, Tori (2002), 'On the Death of Theatre: A Call to Action', in Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich (eds), *Theatre in Crisis? Performance Manifestos for a New Century*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 97–102.
- Hickling, Alfred (2004), 'Meet *The Producers*' Producers', *The Guardian*, 3 November, <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,,1341874,00.html>. Accessed 9 April 2007.
- Hoberman, J. (2005), 'Your Show of Shows: The Movie of the Play of the Movie', *The Village Voice*, 13 December, http://www.villagevoice.com/film/0550_hoberman,70940,20.html. Accessed 9 April 2007.
- Isherwood, Charles (2007), 'Welterweight Bialystock Treads Softly on Big Shtick', *The New York Times*, 19 January, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/19/theater/reviews/19prod.html?ex=1184821200&en=1c0f02b2a6904628&ei=5087&mkt=theaterphoto>. Accessed 9 April 2007.
- Lahr, John (2001), 'Mel Brooks is Back, Mit a Bing, Mit a Bang, Mit a Boom', *The New Yorker*, 7 May, <http://www.producersonbroadway.com/>. Accessed 12 April 2007.
- Levitow, Roberta (2002), 'Some Words About the Theatre Today', in Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich (eds), *Theatre in Crisis?: Performance Manifestos for a New Century*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 25–30.
- Lury, Celia (1996), *Consumer Culture*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- McCartney, Jenny (2006), 'The *Producers*', *Sunday Telegraph*, 1 January, 20–21.
- Mendelsohn, Daniel (2001), 'Double Take', *The New York Review of Books*, 28:10, June 21, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/14271>. Accessed 5 January 2004.
- Mohr, Ian (2005), 'It's like Singin' on the Rhine', *Variety*, 14 March, p. 6.
- Nadelson, Reggie (2005), 'The Never Ending Story', *The Guardian*, 3 June, p. 5.
- Parish, Robert James (2001), *The Seriously Funny Life of Mel Brooks: It's Good to Be the King*, Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Son.
- Quinn, Anthony (2005), 'The *Producers*', *The Independent*, 23 December, p. 89.
- Reynolds, Nigel (2004), 'Star Quits Musical After TV Gaffe', *Telegraph*, 19 October, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2004/10/19/nprod19.xml>. Accessed 7 February 2007.
- Sarris, Andrew (1977a), 'For Mel', in Stuart Byron and Elisabeth Weis (eds), *The National Society of Film Critics on Movie Comedy*, New York: Grossman Publishers, p. 137.
- Sarris, Andrew (1977b), 'The *Producers*, Review of *The Producers*, dir. Mel Brooks', in Stuart Byron and Elisabeth Weis, (eds), *The National Society of Film Critics on Movie Comedy*, New York: Grossman Publishers, 116–118.
- Scherzer, Barbara (2007), 'Reams Joins *Producers* in Vegas: Actor to Replace Hasselhoff in May', *Variety*, 11 April, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117962908.html?categoryid=15&cs=1>. Accessed 12 April 2007.
- Scott, A. O. (2005), 'The *Producers*, Again (This Time With Uma)', *The New York Times*, 16 December, <http://movies2.nytimes.com/2005/12/16/movies/16prod.html?ex=1175054400&en=e7f4519732e5dec5&ei=5070>. Accessed 26 Mar 2007.
- Stroman, Susan (2005), 'Commentary on *The Producers*', Susan Stroman (dir.), *The Producers*, DVD. Sony Pictures.
- Weiss, Hedy (2001), 'A Show of Shows', *Chicago Sun-Times*, 19 February, <http://www.producersonbroadway.com/>. Accessed 12 April 2007.
- Wickstrom, Maurya (1999), 'Commodities, Mimesis, and *The Lion King*: Retail Theatre for the 1990s', *Theatre Journal*, 51:3, 285–298.

Filmography

The Producers (1968), dir. Mel Brooks.

The Producers (2005), dir. Susan Stroman.

Suggested citation

Symons, A. (2008), 'Mass-Market Comedy: How Mel Brooks Adapted *The Producers* for Broadway, and Made a Billion Dollars 2001–2007', *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 1: 2, pp. 133–145, doi: 10.1386/jafp.1.2.133/1

Contributor details

Alex Symons is currently studying for a Ph.D. at the University of Nottingham. His thesis examines comedy and adaptation in popular entertainment, focusing on the multimedia career of Mel Brooks. He also works as editor of film reviews for *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and TV Studies*.

Contact: American and Canadian Studies, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK.

E-mail: aaxas@nottingham.ac.uk

CALL FOR PAPERS

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group

Translation Studies

EDITORS: Kate Sturge, *Aston University, UK*
Michaela Wolf, *University of Graz, Austria*

The journal **Translation Studies** explores promising lines of work within the discipline of Translation Studies while placing a special emphasis on existing connections with neighbouring disciplines and the creation of new links.

The journal aims to test the traditional boundaries of the notion of 'translation' and to offer a forum for debate focusing on historical, social, institutional and cultural issues that are strongly rooted in the text level, but also go far beyond it.

In addition to scholars within Translation Studies, we invite those as yet unfamiliar with or wary of Translation Studies to enter the discussion. Such scholars will include people working in literary theory, sociology, ethnography, philosophy, semiotics, history and historiography, theology, gender studies, postcolonialism, and related fields. The journal supports the conscious pooling of resources for particular purposes and encourages the elaboration of joint methodological frameworks.

All submissions should be made electronically to the editors, Kate Sturge and Michaela Wolf, using both email addresses: k.sturge@aston.ac.uk and michaela.wolf@uni-graz.at.

For further information, please visit the website at www.informaworld.com/translationstudies and go to the 'Instructions for Authors,' page.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

2008, Volume 1 (2 issues per year)

Print ISSN 1751-2921; Online ISSN 1478-1700

Institutional rate (print and online): US\$238; £222; €190

Institutional rate (online only): US\$226; £115; €180

Personal rate (print only): US\$57; £46; €29

For further information, please contact Customer Services at either of the following:

T&F Informa UK Ltd, Sheepen Place, Colchester, Essex, C03 3LP, UK

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7017 5544 Fax: 44 (0) 20 7017 5198

Email: tf.enquiries@informa.com

Taylor & Francis Inc, 325 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106, USA

Tel: +1 800 354 1420 (toll-free calls from within the US) or +1 215 625 8900 (calls from overseas)

Fax: +1 215 625 2940 Email: customerservice@taylorandfrancis.com



View an online sample copy at
www.informaworld.com/translationstudies

Practitioners' Perspectives

Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance Volume 1 Number 2 © 2008 Intellect Ltd
Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/jafp.1.2.147/1

Researching the Method: Some Personal Strategies

Michael Fry *East 15 Acting School, University of Essex*

Abstract

In considering two of my stage adaptations, Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1997) and Emma (1996), I will explain the challenges involved in matching authorial method to theatrical inventiveness. Aspects discussed include the consideration of style, tone and authorial voice, and a comparison between prose and dramatic narrative. Hardy's and Austen's backgrounds, correspondence and literary tastes are referred to, and the impact of this exploration on the respective dramatic methods is illustrated. The production elements are discussed in as much detail as the scripts themselves, including descriptions of the design, musical and movement aspects. Actor challenges, including the depiction of caricature as well as character, are examined. Finally, the context for the adaptations is broached, including my background as a director and artistic director, and how cast-size and resources can often determine the nature of an adaptation as much as the artistic vision.

Keywords

Austen
Hardy
transference
challenges
prose narrative
dramatic narrative
dramatic method

I have written and directed a number of adaptations over the last ten years, but would like, in this essay, to discuss the genesis of the two that have been performed most frequently. I attempt to explain the nature of the background research, which themes influenced the interpretation and, perhaps most importantly, what factors inspired the dramatic method.

My motivation in adapting these novels was circumstantial, based on the need to offer a particular type of work to a familiar audience with a given number of performers. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was originally written for a cast of seven on a small London stage, although it has since been performed by companies with as many as twenty-five actors and more affluent budgets. The manner of its adaptation dictates that *Emma* must be performed by a cast of five, preferably in a theatre of genuine intimacy.

Although there were obvious market factors in these choices (I was an artistic director at their gestations), the guiding tenet was always the potential theatricality of the narrative. Perhaps not coincidentally, both novelists were theatre enthusiasts, and although they may not have produced any durable plays to match their fiction, the nature of their characterization and dialogue was, I believe, affected by regular theatre attendance.

1. The only named characters who do not appear, for those sufficiently curious, are Alec d'Urberville's mother, Angel's brother, Cuthbert Clare and the farmer's wife, Mrs Crick. The amalgamation of Angel's two brothers into one (Felix) is simple since, in caricaturing them, Hardy makes them almost synonymous. Some of Mrs Crick's lines are given over to Jonathan Kail, the elderly farm-hand who develops a newly intimate (though innocent) relationship with his employer. Tess's siblings are reduced from five to three.

The actual writing of the adaptations was fairly swift (about three weeks), since I wanted no distractions from the chronological impetus of the stories. However, the research and reflection that guided the writing took up many months. The nature of these deliberations and the ways in which I attempted to immerse myself in the divergent authorial methods are covered in the following sections.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles

The adaptation was written for a company of seven on a stage that measured fifteen feet by twenty feet. This obviously determined certain features of casting and decor, although, with six actors playing thirty-five parts between them (only the actor playing Tess had no other role), a formative ambition was to ensure as little omission of character as possible.¹

Initial research involved the scrutiny of the various editions of the novel that appeared in Hardy's lifetime. Partly because of the contentious nature of certain sections of the story, and also because Hardy was an inveterate rewriter, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* appeared in a number of remarkably different versions between 1891 and 1912. Despite his literary standing, Hardy had difficulty in getting the novel published. Two publishers returned the manuscript citing its obscenity, and the *Graphic* magazine, whose offer of a weekly serialization Hardy was eventually forced to accept, agreed to print it only on the condition that certain segments (notably the rape, the illegitimate child and some of the more voluptuous descriptions of Tess) were omitted. In the *Graphic* edition, Hardy substitutes the rape – upon which the remainder of the novel depends – with a mock marriage between Alec and Tess. He removes Angel's proposal to live out of wedlock with Izz Huett, and Angel is obliged to use a wheelbarrow to transport the milkmaids across the flooded path, rather than carry them brazenly in his arms.

There were five further editions of the novel before Hardy acknowledged the Macmillan paperback edition of 1912 (with 175 textual changes) as the definitive version. Each of them was useful to compare with the others, since the dialogue underwent considerable alteration, and the characters of Angel Clare and Alec d'Urberville in particular changed in emphasis. (Angel becomes less strait-laced and more sympathetic, and Alec's born-again Christianity is shown to be more disingenuous.) Certain key themes were not introduced until the later versions: the cosmic and the ancestral elements, for instance, did not appear until, respectively, the third and fourth editions.

During each of the successive publications, Hardy was able to introduce increasingly explicit material around the rape and its aftermath, and in the 1912 version he added more candid comments on the role of farmers and landowners in the acceleration of rural decay. Some of the passages from the original manuscript that Hardy was obliged to censor for the *Graphic* never reappeared; even in 1912 the anti-religious tracts were deemed unsuitable for the reading public. I reintroduced some of his original acerbity about Parson Clare's theology and, obliged to expand the dialogue in the baptism scene, used some of the material from the manuscript text which diversifies from the Order of Baptism in the Book of Common Prayer.

An attempt to analyse and assess Hardy's elusive authorial voice proved intricate. In *Tess* the voice is resolutely intrusive: 'on this memorable morning' (Hardy 1978: 75), 'Thus the thing began' (1978: 82); but who is the anonymous personality that continually points to the finger of fate in the prose? 'Had she perceived this meeting's import she might have asked why she was doomed to be seen and coveted that day by the wrong man, and not by some other man, the right and desired one in all respects' (Hardy 1978: 82). While the first-person pronoun is never used, the tone is unmistakably subjective: 'Clare had been harsh towards her; there is no doubt of it' (Hardy 1978: 423), and the narrator's own moral standpoint is clearly stated: 'where He lets the nettles grow, and where, all unbaptized infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally damned are laid' (Hardy 1978: 148). At other times he is self-consciously rhetorical:

Moreover, alone, on a desert island would she have been wretched at what had happened to her? Not greatly. If she could have been but just created, to discover herself as a spouseless mother, with no experience of life except as the parent of a nameless child, would the position have caused her to despair? No, she would have taken it calmly, and found pleasures therein.

(Hardy 1978: 141)

J. Hillis Miller thinks that the narrative voice of Hardy novels 'is as much a fictional invention as any other aspect of the story' and that Hardy attempted 'to imagine himself in a position where he could safely see life as it is without being seen and could report on that seeing' (Miller 1970: 41–43). The concealed persona that emanates through the prose means that if narration is to be used in an adaptation, it cannot easily be re-assigned to other characters or used impersonally, as Hardy attempted in his own stage versions of 1895 and 1925 (see Roberts 1950).

Other narrative hurdles involve the poetical figures in the prose that seem so inseparable from the story. *Tess* is frequently compared with, and even portrayed as, her environment: 'On these lonely hills and dales her quiescent glide was of a piece with the element she moved in. Her flexuous and stealthy figure became an integral part of the scene' (Hardy 1978: 134). The material image on stage can never really replace the metaphorical aspects in many of the descriptive passages. This inevitably offers inspiration rather than imitation to the adapter:

The fire in the grate looked impish – demonically funny, as if it did not care in the least about her strait. The fender grinned idly, as if it too did not care. The light from the water-bottle was merely engaged in a chromatic problem.

(Hardy 1978: 297)

The dramatic method which seemed to me the most appropriate for retaining the structure of the novel and incorporating its themes was to divide the play into the corresponding seven 'phases' of the novel, and to depict the story as seen through the eyes of a quasi-Greek chorus, a pervading but unobtrusive presence that comments on the action at the end of each

2. “‘Justice’ was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylan phrase, had ended his sport with Tess’ (Hardy 1978: 489). The Aeschylan phrase is from line 129 of *Prometheus Bound* (1931).
3. ‘The primrose in the sheäde do blow/The Cowslip in the zun;/ The thyme upon the down do grow/The clote where streams do run...’ (Barnes 1905: 185).
4. Different actors will have differing interpretations as to what extent the encounter is rape or seduction. (It is expedient if the actors playing Alex and Tess concur...)

phase. The basis for this was not only Hardy’s declared propensity for Greek tragedy and the choral structures of *The Dynasts* (1913) and *The Queen of Cornwall* (1923), his only two original plays, but more specifically his reference to ‘the President of the Immortals’ in the final paragraph of the novel.² In trying to define this allusion, Hardy wrote that ‘the forces opposed to the heroine were allegorized as a personality (a method not unusual in imaginative prose or poetry)’ (Hardy 1978b: 54). It was precisely this sort of narrative personality – one that is ‘spatially and psychologically detached’, as Miller puts it (Miller 1970: 54) – through which I sought to convey the story.

In *Greek Tragedy in Action*, Oliver Taplin defines the chorus as ‘an anonymous group [...] whose chief function was to sing and dance the choral odes which divide the acts of the tragedy’ (Taplin 1978: 12); and this is exactly what the chorus does in this adaptation. The chorus opens the play, masked, in a kind of slow, choreographed tableau, as Tess wanders optimistically through the group, and sings, slowly and portentously, the cheerful words to William Barnes’s poem, ‘Blackmored Maidens’.³ The masks are subsequently used as the May Day masks of the clubwalking girls at the start of the story, when the same song is sung more festively.

The whole cast, with the exception of Tess, plays the chorus and sundry roles, commenting upon as well as participating in the various situations and factors that contribute to Tess’s demise – the harsh, misogynistic Victorians, the unhelpful clerics, the impoverished agricultural labourers and finally the police at Stonehenge. When not on stage, some of them sit and observe the action with the audience, perhaps to indicate that we, like they, can only watch helplessly as Tess moves unerringly to her doom. Like a Greek chorus they evince anxiety, but are powerless as Alec rapes the slumbering Tess.⁴

Darkness and Silence ruled everywhere.
But where was Tess’s Guardian Angel?
Where was the provider of her simple faith?
Perhaps, like that other God of whom the Tishbite spoke,
He was talking, or he was pursuing,
Or he was sleeping and not to be awaked.

(Fry 1997: 22)

The choral commentary at the end of each phase is taken verbatim from Hardy’s narrative, but fashioned into verse and spoken imperviously, one line in turn. The speeches generally provide summary moralizing rather than exposition.

A particular sound effect also accompanies the end of each phase. Described in the stage directions as a ‘strange and repeated humming noise, followed by a sharp snap’ (Fry 1997: 1), the noise is a technologically generated sound, designed to appear cosmic (rather than of this world) to represent the external, fatalistic elements that Hardy continually cites, and is partly inspired by the humming that Tess refers to on the eve of her capture at Stonehenge. The snap is actually the sound of a neck breaking, but this is only made apparent at the end of the play.

Another form of narrative in the play consists of the extensive use of music. Music was an important part of Hardy's life (he was an accomplished violinist and wrote regular articles on musical subjects) and the novels contain abundant allusions to local songs and dances. There are over fifty specified ballads in *Tess* alone. The music in the adaptation consists of unaccompanied songs, composed by Anthony Feldman and sung in two- or three-part harmonies by the chorus. The songs are scored to an assortment of Hardy's own poems, or to the dialect poems of William Barnes. (Hardy himself proposed to Baron Frederic d'Erlanger, who had written an opera based on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*,⁵ that he set some of the poems to music, but d'Erlanger never followed this up.)

William Barnes (1800–1886) was a revered Dorset poet whom Hardy cited as the primary influence on his own writing, and who wrote, almost exclusively, in the Dorset dialect. 'William Barnes was not only a lyric writer of the high order of genius', wrote Hardy, 'but probably the most interesting link between present and past forms of life that England possessed' (Hardy 1966: 100), a theme that is equally important, of course, to Hardy's fiction.

We pass on to those more important lyrics which are entirely concerned with human interests and human character. The incidents are those of everyday life, cottagers' sorrows and cottagers' joys [...]. Sun, sky, rain, wind, snow, dawn, darkness, mist, are to him, now as ever, personal assistants and obstructors, with whom he comes directly into contact.

(Hardy 1966: 96–98)

Since it was not possible to incorporate Hardy's extensive descriptions of the landscape, the poems (his own as well as Barnes's) are chosen partly to denote the role of nature in the story. They also crucially facilitate scene changes and signal the passing of time, since there is no narration between scenes.

Sometimes the songs form part of the action, recreating the rituals of country society, as in the opening dance – Barnes's 'Blackmwoe Maidens' (Barnes 1905: 185–186) – or the revelry at Chaseborough Heath – Barnes's 'Hay-Carren' (1905: 52–52). There is a cheerful milking song, inspired by Hardy's poem 'Great Things' for Tess's auspicious arrival at Talbothays (Hardy 1981: 474–475). Sometimes the songs set a context, like the offstage rendition of 'Abide With Me' as Tess arrives at Emminster Vicarage, a hymn that is later hummed derisively by the chorus as Tess and Angel arrive at Stonehenge; sometimes they act as a reprise, to suggest a similar location or state of mind from a previous scene (Hardy's grim poem, 'We Field-Women',⁶ for example, of which three verses are heard); sometimes they provide a cynical commentary by the chorus, as in Hardy's 'The Ruined Maid' at the opening of the final phase, where Tess has become Alec d'Urberville's mistress.⁷

Occasionally, unsung poems are used as part of the narrative, all taken from citations in the novel and used in a variety of ways. Browning's 'Easter Day' (1850) is inserted, not in the context of the book, where Parson Clare is shown to be devoutly following its evangelical line (Hardy 1978: 171), but in a monologue by Angel, who sceptically recites it as

5. The opera was first performed in Naples in 1906, with a libretto by Luigi Illica, Puccini's frequent collaborator, but its reception was rather marred by Mount Vesuvius erupting on the same night (see Roberts 1950: lxii).
6. 'How it rained/When we worked at Flintcomb-Ash/And could not stand upon the hill/Trimming swedes for the slicing-mill/The wet washed through us – plash, plash, plash:/How it rained!' (Hardy 1981: 881).
7. "'O Melia my dear, this does everything crown! Who could have supposed I should meet you in town? And whence such fine garments, such prosperity?" - / "O, didn't you know I'd been ruined?" said she' (Hardy 1981: 158).

a way of encapsulating his incremental agnosticism; Tennyson's admonition of religious tolerance in 'In Memoriam' (1849) is used, not as a judgement by Angel, but as part of Tess's reading material while she waits for Angel to return from his parents; Satan's temptation of Eve in Book IX of *Paradise Lost* (1667), is recited by Alec d'Urberville (lying across a gravestone) just before he finally lures Tess into returning to him.

The stage directions are deliberately minimal – 'a field' (Fry 1997: 55), 'Talbothays Dairy' (Fry 1997: 27), 'the d'Urberville ancestral home at Wellbridge' (Fry 1997: 45) –, since the design elements of the play will inevitably be more suggestive than vivid. The set has to somehow accommodate cottages, carriages, traps, a threshing machine, the banks of a river, as well as elements of doom and destiny. This dictates an impressionistic conceit, as the play (unlike the film) cannot possibly evince rolling hills and vistas.

The original designer, Caroline Elliott, eschewed green as a predominant colour and painted the entire stage and auditorium in a steel blue-grey abstract wash, inspired by Turner (Hardy's favourite painter). This was intended to be representative of Tess's own cold, bleak world and to offer an indeterminate context for the more tangible action. On the back wall was a dripping (setting) red sun, which was highlighted with a homogeneous crimson glow at key moments, in accordance with the constant red imagery of the novel: the blood spurting from Prince the horse, the strawberries, the threshing machine, the red glow of Alec's cigar (with its added phallic function) and of course the rape and the murder. Mrs Brooks, the landlady, was able to reach up and touch it when she noticed blood on her ceiling. J. T. Laird argues in *The Shaping of Tess of the d'Urbervilles* that much of the red imagery in the novel allowed Hardy to suggest by implication what he was not permitted to describe explicitly (1975: 62).

The most important element of the design is that everything about it should, like the story itself, be finally, fatally leading up to Stonehenge. In the first production, a series of blocks were moved, by the chorus, into an infinite number of different shapes, representing walls, wagons, carriages, hills and hedges. Eventually, with two of them placed vertically and one horizontally, they emerged as the pagan monument. Six wooden gates, attached to the back wall, became doorways, cow-pens, walls for daubing biblical quotations and paintings of Tess's antecedents. When removed altogether in the second half, their sudden absence added to the austerity of the Flintcomb-Ash scenes. The biblical quotations that the preacher of texts nails to gates – 'THY, DAMNATION, SLUMBERETH, NOT', 'THOU, SHALT, NOT, COMMIT...' – (Fry 1997: 23) were left on the back wall throughout the rest of the play, serving as a cruelly ironic reminder of the narrative.

The dialogue needed little adjustment. Hardy's dialect spelling and the relative degrees of eloquence among the characters are rigorously authentic and there are handy references to rhetoric throughout the novel:

Mrs Durbeyfield habitually spoke the dialect; her daughter, who had passed the Sixth Standard in the National School under a London-trained mistress, spoke two languages; the dialect at home, more or less; ordinary English abroad and to persons of quality.

(Hardy 1978: 58)

Tess's articulacy develops during the novel, particularly under Angel's tuition. Since even Alec d'Urberville notices the refinement – 'Who has taught you such good English?' (1978: 389) –, the stage dialogue has to acknowledge the increasing maturity of her diction and the waning of the dialect.

The facsimile of the manuscript (Hardy 1986) provided a useful review of Hardy's grammatical marks. The original punctuation is remarkably revealing about motivation and speech patterns, full of dashes and ellipses. While no claim could be made for Hardy's own forays into drama, the manuscript shows him to have an ear for rhythm and hiatus that is almost Pinteresque. Many of the marks – particularly the ellipses in the middle of a sentence to denote a gesture – provide a kind of stage direction in themselves. As Tess and Angel make their midnight journey to the station with the milk, Angel tries to protect Tess from the rain with a piece of sail-cloth: 'It runs down my neck a little and it must still more into yours... That's better' (Hardy 1978: 250).

Simon Gatrell, in 'Hardy, House-Style, and the Aesthetics of Punctuation' (1979), explains how the original publishers – notably the *Graphic* – altered Hardy's punctuation with draconian disregard, in order to conform to their house-style. Gatrell lists 1,281 instances where commas were added to Hardy's original manuscript and 440 where his dashes were either altered to another grammatical mark, or omitted altogether. Far from being grammatical lapses, Hardy's omission of commas is entirely deliberate, often denoting alacrity in the speech of the more impulsive characters, as in John Durbeyfield's, 'And here have I been knocking about year after year from pillar to post as if I was no more than the commonest, dirt-cheapest feller in the parish' (Hardy 1983: 15) or Tess's 'O no you won't' (Hardy 1983: 80) as she sprints away from Alec d'Urberville.

The dash is equally significant. Hardy's use of it in the following extract tells the actor playing Alec d'Urberville exactly where to take a pause: 'It was but a momentary spasm; and considering what – you had been to me, it was natural enough...' (Hardy 1986: 54). The pause could indicate a variety of emotions (embarrassment, affection, curiosity) but the lack of it in most editions makes Alec a less arresting character. The dash suggests a caesura before Angel's rather esoteric expression, 'How can forgiveness meet such a grotesque – prestidigitation as that?' (Hardy 1983: 325). This indicates a lack of fluency that makes much more sense of Angel's pedantry at this point in the novel.

In the introduction to his edition of the novel, Gatrell (1983) selects passages to show how the *Graphic* editors decisively transformed character motivation. In the final section of the novel, just after Angel has been informed of Tess's domestic arrangements (with Alec) and has departed, Hardy's manuscript has her cry out: 'Now he is gone, gone! A second time and I have lost him now forever...' (Hardy 1986: 156). Most editors have followed the *Graphic*'s 'Now he is gone. Gone a second time, and I have lost him now forever...' (Hardy 1983: 98). As Gatrell points out, 'the effect of Tess's "gone, gone!" is that her mind dwells on the full force of her new loss of Angel, and only after lingering on it does she think of the previous occasion: "A second time..."' (Hardy 1983: 99). This is by no means

an insubstantial change and it is a crucial one in assisting the actress who plays Tess to understand the level of her despair and irrationality at this point, a state that leads her to murder.

The comedy in Hardy's fiction is often submerged by the merciless misfortunes that his protagonists suffer. The number of jocular passages in *Tess* is in fact considerable and calculated. Having striven for a similarly proportionate balance between the serious and the droll in the play, I found that the audiences were generally surprised by the extent of the light relief. The incident of the flooded path can certainly benefit from witnessing the comparative reactions of the four milkmaids as Angel transports them to the other side of the bank, and the wit in the language becomes more manifest: 'Tess: I hope I am not too heavy. Angel: Oh no, you should lift Marion!' (Fry 1997: 35). Alec d'Urberville's drollery, which is often overlooked by the adolescent Tess, is not lost on the audience, in an uncomfortable example of dramatic irony; conversely, the absurdity of Alec's Christian conversion, which the more-weathered Tess apprehends, offers important light relief during the relentless second half of the play.

St John Ervine alluded in print to the 'potential' of Hardy as a dramatist (Ervine 1928: 4). *The Dynasts*, *The Queen of Cornwall* and the copious adaptations of the novels that he himself wrote for the Hardy Players rather belie that assertion. Yet the story of *Tess* is so inherently dramatic that, with minimum directives from the adapter, it communicates its desolation to the audience with forceful sentence. In performance, the final scene at Stonehenge is often accompanied by the indomitable sounds of unwrapped tissues issuing from the auditorium.

Emma

Jane Austen would seem, at first sight, to be almost ostentatiously unadaptable. Dialogue constitutes only about a half of her words, and it is usually what is not said by the characters that contributes to her style and genius. The novelistic technique of 'free indirect speech', which (in the English language) she essentially coined, does not, in any sense, lend itself to drama. According to David Lodge, this is defined as 'reporting the thoughts of a character in language that approximates more or less closely to their own idiolect and deleting the introductory tags, such as "he thought", "she wondered", and the like' (Lodge 1986: 175). In other words, without the irony of the commentary – supposedly objective narration, but propounded through the highly subjective and generally fallacious mind of the eponymous heroine – the substance of the story is lost. More than most novelists, Jane Austen's style really is her meaning; plot and dialogue (the main constituents of the standard play) cannot easily be separated from the narrative. An unqualified presentation of the plot, moreover, fails to do justice to the spirit of the prose, as most of the countless film and television adaptations of the novels have amply demonstrated.

In searching for a dramatic structure that could retain the tone and some of the narrative of the novel, it struck me that theatre was in fact very much a part of Jane Austen's early life and influence. Her letters reveal numerous references to parlour games, charades and readings, and

on each visit to London, she would try to attend a play and later analyse the performances:

'The Farmer's Wife' is a Musical thing in 3 Acts & as Edmund was steady in not staying for anything more, we were at home before 10 [...] That Miss S. gave me no pleasure is no reflection upon her, nor I hope upon myself. All that I am sensible of is that Miss S. has a pleasing person and no skill in acting.

The Clandestine Marriage was the most respectable of the performances, the rest were Sing-song and trumpery, but did very well for Lizzy and Marianne, who were indeed delighted; – but I wanted better acting – there was no actor worth naming.

(Austen 1995: 203)

More crucially, for my purposes, the 'private theatricals', which are such an integral part of the plot of *Mansfield Park*, were also a highly favoured pastime of the large Austen family, the members of which liked to refer to themselves as a theatrical troupe. Their letters and anecdotes reveal a copious number of plays that were regularly performed in the rectory dining room or the barn, usually produced by Austen's oldest brother James, who had literary ambitions himself and conscientiously wrote out new prologues and epilogues for each piece.

Jane Austen took leading roles in the productions and even wrote three short plays for the troupe: *The Visit, a Comedy in 2 Acts*; *The Mystery, an Unfinished Comedy* and *The First Act of a Comedy* (see Austen 1993). She also wrote an adaptation of Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*, her favourite novel. Her devotion to Richardson was a family joke and her party piece was an ability to recall the day of the year upon which episodes in his three novels were supposed to have taken place. The adaptation, while not in itself a remarkable work of drama, nevertheless provides an availing look at Austen's early creative process, as well as her own theatrical instincts: her juvenile impulse for interaction and enactment is striking. Opening with a scene of her own devising, it goes on to both simulate and lampoon the novel, her sense of humour shown in the adaptive process itself, in reducing such a mammoth novel to a quick play.

Sarah's 'Emma' After Jane, as my adaptation was originally called, takes its lead from this sort of homespun drama. Five young people, in Georgian attire, decide to stage, rather than simply read, a version of *Emma*. They strangely manifest similar traits to some of the characters in the novel and there is a great deal of rivalry and in-fighting, particularly for the playing of certain roles. The metatheatrical method is intended to provide a natural form of distance from the story itself, exemplifying both the action and the mordant authorial tone. The actors are either the characters in the novel or the young people in the room, or occasionally both. The narrative is shared between them and carefully divided between Sarah – the smug, bossy one, who plays Emma and who provides the commentary where Emma is apparently describing herself –, Jane – 'her best friend', who mildly mocks Emma's lack of self-insight – and Elizabeth – 'not quite such a good friend' (Fry 1996: 4), who provides the more

brutally discerning observations that are generally recognizable as the author's own.

Sarah: Sorrow came.
Jane: A gentle sorrow – but not at all in the shape of any disagreeable consciousness.
Elizabeth: Miss Taylor married.

(Fry 1996: 8)

After a short prologue when the young people (ages unspecified for the purposes of dramatic licence) enter the attic setting, establish their characters and relationships and search for a play to perform (rejecting *The Rivals*, Thomas Franklin's *Matilda* and Susannah Centlivre's *The Wonder* – plays that the Austen family themselves performed), Sarah settles upon *Emma*, with herself in the title role:

Sarah (inarguably): My idea. My house. My Emma.
Jane and Elizabeth: Naturally.

(Fry 1996: 7)

Everything that is needed for the presentation of the play-within-the-play is found in the cupboards and boxes in the attic. In the original production, the designer developed the idea of a wardrobe which, when turned around, was found to be backless (in a real, rather than a Narnian sense), and very suitable for the inside of a carriage or the entrance to the Bates's more humble dwelling. Most of the other acting areas were created with chairs and tables, although a slightly raised upstage area usefully doubled as exteriors. Props were sought, when called for, with varying degrees of success, and (minimal) costume accessories in the shape of bonnets, shawls, jackets and dog collars were found hanging on rails and coat-stands.

When there were not enough 'actors' available, quick improvisations resulted in the occasional playing of Mr Woodhouse by a broom (as wooden and inert as the character himself) and Harriet by a rag doll – one that Emma could drag around the stage with her. Five furry animals, representing Emma's young nieces and nephews, were bounced up and down on various kindred knees. A dog collar and a rather vulgar hat sat by the picnickers at Box Hill, since Mr and Mrs Elton, who are technically present, do not actually contribute much to its action, the focus being on Emma and Frank's escalating hysteria and culminating in Emma's insult to Miss Bates.

Austen's dialogue is not as intrinsically speakable as Hardy's. Her characters talk more epigrammatically and their speeches are often too long for apt stage discourse. Most of the adaptive work on the dialogue concerned the filleting down of speeches to a proportion of their original lengths, while maintaining sufficient embellishment.

The period aspects are clearly critical. Since music was a routine pleasure of middle-class Georgian life and an especially favoured pastime of Austen herself (who would rise early each morning to play her piano), it became an integral part of the play. One of the few items of attic furniture to be specified in the stage directions is an old Broadwood piano, which is regularly played by the cast. There are constant references to

music in the novel: Jane Fairfax is an accomplished musician, and the anonymous arrival at her aunt's home of a pianoforte is one of the intimations of the subplot; Emma *attempts* to be an accomplished musician; Mrs Weston is invariably called upon to play the piano at the balls; Frank Churchill enjoys singing in public; and one of the first tasks that Emma sets Harriet, in improving her social etiquette, is to sit her down at the instrument.

The choice of music was determined by the pieces that Austen herself is reported to have played (her favoured musicians being Handel, Haydn and Field) and also the compositions referred to in *Emma* and the other novels. There are fifteen references to music in the adaptation, some specified, such as the Clementi sonata that opens the play, the Irish melody that Frank Churchill sings at the first ball, and the Italian love duet that he sings with Jane Fairfax. All of the music is for solo piano, with the exception of the two ball scenes, where, in the original production, string quartets were composed and recorded by Matthew Scott.

There are three dances cited in the adaptation, all of which correlate quite specifically to the plot. (The first shows Mrs Elton insisting on leading the set, the second relates to Mr Elton's snubbing of Harriet and the third joins Emma and Mr Knightley together in their first intimate contact.) The only dance mentioned by name in Austen's novels is the 'Boulanger' in *Pride and Prejudice*, but her letters describe many dances that she and her sister attended. 'Longways for as many as will' was the most popular style, closely followed by 'Round dances for as many as will', both of which were researched and recreated by the choreographer Sheila Irwin, for her not-quite-epic cast of five. Most dances of the time involved jumping, forming rings and linking hands, while clapping, bowing or curtsying.

Although, as Terry Castle points out, 'it must be a colossally incompetent reader who misses, for example, that Mr Elton does not in any way pine for Harriet Smith; or that Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax are in some manner romantically involved' (Castle 1995: xiv), this presents a dilemma for the director and actors: how much of this should be conveyed to an audience, of which many must be assumed to be ignorant of the story, while others will wish for palpable verification of their foreknowledge. Eye contact therefore has to be acknowledged but limited between Frank and Jane, and Mr Elton's unctuousness has to repeatedly extend to Harriet as well as to Emma. The actress playing Jane Fairfax has the further challenge of playing the character's reticence and enigma, while continuing to experience the anguish about which Emma (and, technically, the reader/audience) knows nothing. As Claire Tomalin points out: 'Jane Fairfax is a thinner character than the girl who behaves so outrageously as to enter into a secret engagement [...]' (Tomalin 1997: 252).

While Mr Elton and Mr Woodhouse offer dangerous potential for parody, the remaining male characters, when personified, appear more credibly charismatic than they sometimes seem in the prose, belying Virginia Woolf's theory that Austen's heroes are 'less the equals of her heroines than should have been the case' (Woolf 1913). The actor cast as Mr Knightley does however have the challenge of playing a character who

appears strangely unconscious of his love for Emma and manifestly uncertain of his own feelings:

I confess I have seldom seen a face or figure more pleasing to me than hers.
But I am a partial old friend. I have a very sincere interest in Emma. I wonder
what will become of her?

(Fry 1996: 19)

Despite the fairly extensive doubling, and the nature of the play, the characterization rarely borders on the caricature, and while there are sundry jocular interventions, for the most part the scenes themselves are taken seriously by the actors, and played relatively straight. All five actors are on stage throughout, either sitting at the side watching or enthusiastically moving their 'scenery'.

* * * * *

As the writer Ring Lardner, friend of F. Scott Fitzgerald, wrote about Owen Davis's 1925 Broadway adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, 'Every now and then one of Scott's lines would pop out and hit you in the face and make you wish he had done the dramatisation himself' (Brucoli and Dugga 1980: 189). My intention in both of these adaptations was to make them appear as though they *could* have been written by the novelists themselves (which – as far as the rhetoric is concerned – they mostly were). It would be encouraging to think that Hardy and Austen might have extolled the methods and theatricality as much as the veracity, and that perhaps even Hardy might have come round from his ultimate, hard-bitten theory that 'to dramatize a novel was a mistake in art' (Hardy 1892).

Works cited

- Aeschylus (1931), *Prometheus Bound* (trans. Gilbert Murray), Allen and Unwin.
- Austen, Jane (1993), *Catharine and Other Writings* (M. A. Doody and D. Murray eds), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Austen, Jane (1966), *Emma*, Penguin.
- Austen, Jane (1995), *Jane Austen's Letters* (Deirdre Le Faye ed., 3rd ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Austen, Jane (1980), *Sir Charles Grandison* (Brian Southam ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barnes, William (1905), *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co.
- Brucoli, Matthew J. and Dugga, M. M. (eds) (1980), *Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, New York: Random House.
- Castle, Terry (1995), 'Introduction', in Jane Austen, *Emma*, Oxford University Press, i–xxxviii.
- Ervine, St John (1928), *How to Write a Play*, London: G. Allen and Unwin.
- Fry, Michael (1996), *Emma*, in Michael Fry (ed.) *Frontline Drama 4: Adapting Classics*, London: Methuen, 3–96.
- Fry, Michael (1997), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Samuel French.

- Gatrell, Simon (1979), 'Hardy, House-Style, and the Aesthetics of Punctuation', in Anne Smith (ed.), *The Novels of Thomas Hardy*, London: Vision Press, 154–192.
- Gatrell, Simon (1983), 'Introduction', in Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (Simon Gatrell and Juliet Grindle eds), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 5–99.
- Hardy, Thomas (1891), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Graphic* (4 July to 26 December).
- Hardy, Thomas (1 September 1892), 'Why I don't write plays', *Pall Mall Gazette*.
- Hardy, Thomas (1913), *The Dynasts: An Epic-Drama of the War with Napoleon*, in *Three Parts*, London: Macmillan.
- Hardy, Thomas (1923), *The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall at Tintagel in Lyonesse*, London: Macmillan.
- Hardy, Thomas (1966), *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings: Prefaces, Literary Opinions, Reminiscences* (Harold Orel ed.), Lawrence: Kansas University Press.
- Hardy, Thomas (1978a), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, London: Penguin.
- Hardy, Thomas (1978b), *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* (Michael Millgate ed.), Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Hardy, Thomas (1981), *The Complete Poems*, London: Macmillan.
- Hardy, Thomas (1983), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (Simon Gatrell and Juliet Grindle eds), Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hardy, Thomas (1986), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Facsimile of the Manuscript with Related Materials* (Simon Gatrell ed.), *The Thomas Hardy Archive*: 1, Vol. 2, New York and London: Garland.
- Laird, J. T. (1975), *The Shaping of Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lodge, David (1986), 'Jane Austen's Novels: Form and Structure', in J. David Grey (ed.), *The Jane Austen Handbook*, London: Athlone Press, 165–178.
- Miller, J. Hillis (1970), *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Roberts, Marguerite (1950), *Tess in the Theatre: Two Dramatizations of Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy, One by L. Stoddard*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Taplin, Oliver (1978), *Greek Tragedy in Action*, London: Methuen.
- Tomalin, Claire (1997), *Jane Austen: A Life*, London: Viking.
- Woolf, Virginia (1913), 'Review', *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 May.

Suggested citation

Fry, M. (2008), 'Researching the Method: Some Personal Strategies', *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 1: 2, pp. 147–159, doi: 10.1386/jafp.1.2.147/1

Contributor details

Dr Michael Fry has been a director and writer for twenty years. His most recent adaptation, *The Trumpet-Major*, and his forthcoming, full-length study of the adaptive genre, *Playing the Novel*, are both published by Oberon Books. He was Arts Council Associate Director at Chester Gateway, Liverpool Everyman and Nuffield Southampton Theatres; Artistic Director of Great Eastern Stage; Professor of Theatre at Washington University, St Louis; and Senior Lecturer at Coventry University. He is currently Deputy Director of East 15 Acting School, University of Essex.

Contact: East 15 Acting School, Hatfields, Rectory Lane, Loughton, Essex, IG10 3RY, UK.

E-mail: mfmf@clara.co.uk

NEW VOICES in Translation Studies

An IATIS online journal

New Voices in Translation Studies is a **REFEREED ELECTRONIC JOURNAL** co-sponsored by the International Association for Translation and Intercultural Studies (IATIS) and the Centre for Translation and Textual Studies (CTTS) at Dublin City University. The aim of *New Voices* is to disseminate high quality work produced by **new** researchers.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The third issue is now open – articles are published as they are ready, so **do send us yours soon!** You will find the guidelines on our website

www.iatis.org/newvoices

Editors: **Marion Winters, Charlotte Bosseaux and Stefan Baumgarten**



International Association for
Translation & Intercultural Studies



Centre for Translation
& Textual Studies, Dublin City University

Reviews

Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance Volume 1 Number 2 © 2008 Intellect Ltd
Reviews. English language. doi: 10.1386/jafp.1.2.161/4

Signes du spectacle: Des arts vivants aux médias, **André Helbo (2006)**

Brussels: PIE-Peter Lang, 147 pp., ISBN 978-90-5201-322-0,
Paperback, £13.90

Reviewed by **Christophe Collard**, *Vrije Universiteit Brussel*

E-mail: clcollar@vub.ac.be



The preposition 'aux' in *Signes du spectacle: Des arts vivants aux médias* forges a direct link with semiologist André Helbo's earlier *L'adaptation: Du théâtre au cinéma* (1997) and sets the tone for a conceptual elaboration of '[la] transformation spectaculaire' (10). Studies of interaesthetic passages pertaining to the performing arts traditionally disregard the socio-semiological process in favour of a static comparative approach. Paradoxically, it is precisely their dynamic character that fuels these complex transfers of creative energy. Helbo's preliminary concern therefore bears on the definition of an interdisciplinary paradigm capable of integrating the sociological, semiotic, generic and cultural specificities

of 'la marque spectaculaire' (19). The book's ultimate objective, though, is to present performance-based adaptation as 'intersemiotic translation'. This concept banks on the aforementioned referent to gain a better understanding of the 'opération de croisement interartistique dans la pluralité de ses dimensions', the reception-mechanisms involved, as well as of the various thresholds crossed and established (20).

In practice, *Signes du spectacle* addresses its objectives in clusters of closely interrelated chapters. These, moreover, are structured along a fluid pattern that begins with the contextualized introduction of one of the argument's central constituents and is followed by its theoretical assessment. The latter, in turn, is challenged in short case studies. Neighbouring clusters similarly overlap in order to establish a consistent progression that repeatedly confronts, integrates and refines the various

focal points. This is all the more fortunate since the subject matter's complexity could easily lead the argument astray. Occasionally, the author's erudite enthusiasm indeed somewhat stretches the limits of functionality. On the other hand, the tenth chapter, 'Adaptation et transduction: Une liaison dangereuse?' offers a lucid recapitulation in the guise of a more generalized approach to 'la phénoménologie du transfert' (87). In so doing, André Helbo adroitly justifies the inclusion of three practice-oriented chapters, each of which deliberately challenges the proposed paradigm with problematic variants on 'l'objet spectacle comme transposition' (20). Beyond concerns of consistency and clarity, this book's design thus derives its significance from its structural rejection of 'pseudo-certitudes' (20).

The presentation of as transitive and abstract a process as intersemiotic translation must itself proceed by metaphor to permit any additional conceptual elaboration. The argument's vehicular principle of 'transduction' was borrowed from medical science and denotes the transmission of genetic material from one bacteriophage to another by a third colonizing organism. In a figurative sense, the prefix 'trans' would then stress the active role of the interpreter. This way, adaptation itself is conceptualized as a reciprocally (re-) evaluative process analogous to the mediating instances that interiorize the contextual and institutional constraints affecting the enunciation. In short, transduction entails that any comparisons between a 'proto-text' and a 'meta-text' should make way for broader analyses discussing the complex networks of poly-systemic relations, trajectories and operators (21–22). Born from a sense of frustration with the conservatism of the comparative approach, the model proposed in *Signes du spectacle* is precisely designed towards systematic cognitive reassessment. For, when genetic causality is broadened to poly-systemic dialectics, the hybridism of the postmodern cultural complex and the restrictions of extant generic conventions appear interdependent, which defines both as essentially generative.

It is Helbo's particular emphasis on the performing arts that enables him to reveal the heterogeneous nature of 'la représentation' (40). His epistemological discussion of the *mise-en-scène* underscores the 'cathartic' (52) meeting between the intrinsically overlapping perspectives of author, actor and spectator. Still, overlapping equally implies incongruities, which consequently re-defines the notion of 'text' in terms of an 'idle mechanism' that merely exists on behalf of the meaning derived from it (61). As interpretation is a creative act, every creative act is necessarily transformation and hence adaptation. Yet, since interpretation must occur within receptive frameworks, adaptation need not imply a wholesale cultural relativism: 'l'adaptation se joue entre des univers de référence, des mondes possibles et la représentation plus ou moins consciente de ces mondes' (65). Rather than contributing to the implosion of existing generic boundaries, the proposed concept of intersemiotic translation acknowledges their pragmatic function while remaining focused on the specific dynamic that marshals the circulation between texts, contexts and their reception (75).

The author further streamlines his argument by insisting on the 'target-oriented' character of both (linguistic) translation and adaptation

(81). When effectively juxtaposed with his poly-systemic model, this perspective refutes the presumed linearity associated with transformation of any kind. Accordingly, the principle of transposition no longer signals an exchange between static entities, but instead a *de facto* integration of different *dispositifs* (83). In other words, André Helbo's adaptation theory, while figured through the transduction-metaphor, revolves around the cognitive association of multiple 'semiotics in translation' (90). However, substituting the traditional genetic framework for its poly-systemic counterpart may turn out to be just as daunting as the possibilities it offers. Whether, then, the predominantly abstract nature of Helbo's argumentation effectively poses 'autant de questions qu'elle en résout' (90) depends on its interpreter's disposition.

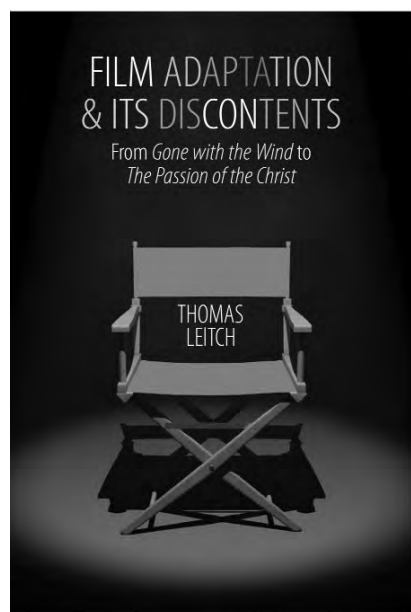
Work cited

Helbo, André (1997), *L'adaptation: Du théâtre au cinéma*, Paris: Armand Collin.

***Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of Christ*, Thomas Leitch (2007)**

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 354 pp., ISBN 978-0-8018-8565-5, Hardback, \$55

Reviewed by Dr Alison Forsyth, Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies, University of Aberystwyth
E-mail: alf@aber.ac.uk



As opposed to being a volume that mechanistically analyses selected films inspired by novels, comprising little more than 'a collection of paired readings [...] comparing each given film to its putative source' (20), Thomas Leitch's study endeavours to propose film adaptation as a complex, multi-faceted and often problematic form of 'rewriting' (21) in its own right.

Moving beyond the traditional format of providing close readings of films based on novels, Leitch extends our understanding of adaptation by looking at films that respond to other less discussed sources, including those inspired by comic books such as *Superman* (1978), *Batman* (1989) and *Spiderman* (2002); others

which return to the Bible, as exemplified by Mel Gibson's controversial *The Passion of Christ* (2004); some of which are little more than loosely crafted spin-offs from a 'franchise' (207) built around a central hero such

as Sherlock Holmes; and those which are introduced with the claim of being adapted and 'based on a true story' (280) such as *Dog Day Afternoon* (1978) and *Awakenings* (1990). The admirable diversity of sources considered by Leitch is undoubtedly a welcome enlargement of recent discourse in the field, and it makes for a detailed, illuminating and provocative development to our understanding of adaptation studies.

Leitch assiduously contextualizes his argument, with a concise but highly informative introductory chapter that gently guides the reader through the key theoretical opinions on adaptation and its purpose. Included here are the various taxonomies of adaptation studies inspired by Matthew Arnold and E. D. Hirsch, whereby the demands of literacy were promoted over and above any literary or aesthetic aims and when source texts were treated as '...canonical authoritative discourse or readerly works rather than internally persuasive discourse or writerly texts' (12). Despite acknowledging a subsequent Barthes-inspired critical trend toward a 'more active literacy' (18) when considering the hermeneutic potential of films based on earlier literary and non-literary sources, the author argues that too often the scope of the term 'adaptation' has been underestimated in terms of its range and complexity, and thus it has too often been subject to lazy critical evaluation.

By way of a loosely constructed but helpful chronological framework to this compelling reassessment of film adaptation, the first chapter focuses on the late-nineteenth and early turn-of-the-twentieth century examples of film adaptations, including Thomas Edison's silent *Rip Van Winkle* released in 1896, which sought to parasitically nourish itself on a perceived great canonical literary tradition in order to add a sense of respectability and intellectualism to what was then a novel and hitherto untested media. This was the era of what Leitch identifies as 'one-reel epics' (22), and it heralded a marked return to Shakespeare for inspiration, when vivid yet silent adaptations, produced on the premise of providing a swift exposition of the plays' narratives, replete with striking tableaux scenes, sought to replace the verbal and textual demands of the Bard's work. However, if I were to highlight one flaw in what is otherwise an admirably broad-ranging and rigorous reconsideration of film adaptation it would be at this juncture, for Leitch fails to consider the quite distinct demands of adapting stage plays and theatrical events for celluloid, and instead he categorizes these Shakespeare adaptations in much the same way as adaptations based on literary sources by, say, Thackeray or Wilde.

An intelligent consideration of the continuing pitfalls and challenges surrounding the recurring but often controversial fascination for film adaptations of the Bible follows, with examples ranging from Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) and George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) through to Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* (2004). In contradistinction to highlighting the perilous task of adapting *the Book*, as opposed to *a book*, Leitch devotes the fourth chapter to a lively and amusing discussion of adaptations of 'the classics' that have often been labelled educational and as providing a cinematic gateway for viewers who 'have limited interest or ability to enjoy the book itself' (70). Adaptation as an

entry level route to the literary classics, and more specifically the works of Charles Dickens, is eloquently discussed through a meticulously researched compendium of past and more recent examples. The author goes on to overturn the loftily didactic and paternalistic *raison d'être* for such adaptations, with a sophisticated polemic about the Dickens adaptation industry. Arguing that the commercialization of Dickens the author, as opposed to the source texts themselves, has in some instances become the main focus of more playfully ironic adaptations, Leitch highlights Jim Henson's 1992 *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, which, with a parodic self-reflexivity, commences with Gonzo introducing himself as Charles Dickens.

Other fascinating, and hitherto neglected, perspectives on both film and television adaptations are provided and pose a lively interrogation of current scholarly preoccupations within the field of adaptation studies, not least the hitherto unchallenged approaches that concentrate on close readings of source texts (which are invariably literary texts) and evaluations based on rather nebulous notions of fidelity. Why, the author asks, should a slavishly textual and reverential cinematic reconstruction of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* be considered more successful than a film or television series which is imaginatively inspired and subtly alludes to an earlier written or, indeed, visual source? In response to his own rhetorical but crucial question, Leitch provides us with a discussion of an array of adaptations which are not primarily inspired by words or literary sources; these include examples of the economically successful adaptations based on children's picture books, comic strips and videogames. From the Ron Howard film, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (2000) and the *Superman* adaptations (1978–1987) through to what the author categorizes as 'postliterary' (257) film adaptations of, for example, board games, such as *Clue* (1985), and popular videogames, Leitch persuasively prompts us to move beyond outmoded evaluative criteria when considering adaptation, by extending not only our understanding of the process of adaptation, but by productively complicating the established discourse surrounding adaptation studies. Through engrossing analyses of films such as Peter Webber's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (2003) – a cinematographic adaptation of a novel, which in turn depends on visual sources – Leitch acknowledges and illustrates the potential complexities of those adaptations inspired by far more than one earlier textual source, and which respond to '...often multiple, often competing intertexts – some visual, some verbal, some generic, some historical and cultural' (202).

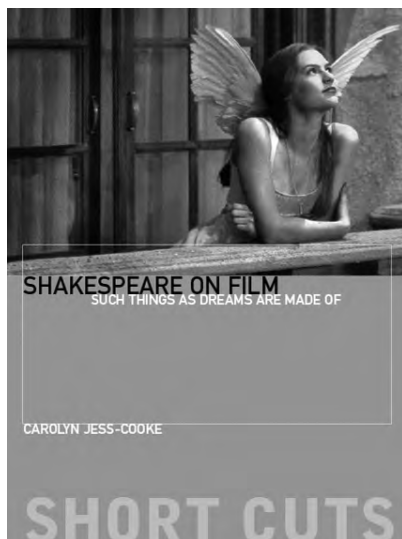
This convincingly argued and eloquently presented volume is replete with an array of accessible examples that provide an illustrative stylistic lightness of touch that pre-empts any requirement for laboriously articulated and dense description, whilst resisting any potential dilution of the underlying radical and important thesis – a thesis which incontrovertibly advances and enhances our approach to adaptation studies on a number of highly original and insightful levels.

***Shakespeare on Film: Such Things As Dreams Are Made Of,*
Carolyn Jess-Cooke (2007)**

London and New York: Wallflower, 125 pp.,
ISBN 978-1-905674-14-5, Paperback, £12.99

Reviewed by Márta Minier, University of Glamorgan

E-mail: mminier@glam.ac.uk



Carolyn Jess-Cooke's book is an item of Wallflower Press's wide-ranging 'Short Cuts: Introductions to Film Studies' series; consequently, it is an academic work at the intersection of Shakespeare studies and film studies. It demonstrates considerable strengths in both areas, and it links the two fields successfully. An introductory chapter is followed by four chapters of discussion and a well-detailed appendix consisting of resources related to Shakespeare films and the study of Shakespeare in a wider context.

Jess-Cooke's book on Shakespeare films prides itself on an expressive subtitle: *Such Things As Dreams Are Made Of*. Indeed, this introductory, yet

rather comprehensive, study of Shakespeare on screen examines the phenomenon in question from the perspective of a well-versed film expert, using nuanced and systematic film terminology consistently, yet keeping non-film specialists constantly in mind by giving feasible definitions of terms to do with the practicalities of film-making and often providing accessible examples of these concepts from big-screen Shakespeares. This is especially the case in 'Film Style', the chapter most abundant in information on filming techniques. Jess-Cooke's work is one of the rare studies in the field that offers a nearly microscopic analysis of scenes from Shakespeare films when illustrating a point or a concept; for instance, the re-imagining of the dumb show in Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000) is described in minute detail with regard to the editing practice of montage (72–75).

Jess-Cooke's work contends, rather ambitiously, that 'It is in cinema [...] that cultural activity with Shakespeare is at its most diverse' (86). One might argue – not with the aim of contradicting but rather that of broadening the scope so that it includes a few more modes of revisiting Shakespeare – that cultural interrogation and rewriting also takes place extensively and in a versatile manner in interlingual translation and in the very practice of staging Shakespeare plays, which may be perceived as an act of adaptation per se, regardless of the volume and method of alterations made.

The chapter entitled 'Popularisation' is particularly interesting to the adaptation expert, not only because it ventures beyond the realm of cinema. Jess-Cooke brings together here – even if only by a mere reference – areas of popularization such as 'globalisation, consumerism, exploitation, digital

culture, various aspects of film production and marketing, mass media, tourism, Shakespeare festivals, Shakespeare criticism, the work of particular directors, a very long list of appropriational methods and the vagaries of postmodernism' (84). The chapter surveys ways of appropriating Shakespeare, with examples ranging from the American sitcom *My Wife and Kids* (2001–2005), to *The Simpsons*, *Star Wars*, and offshoots such as *Deliver Us From Eva* (a 2003 film reminiscent of *The Taming of the Shrew*) as well as historical specimens of adapting Shakespeare, for instance Tate's, Davenant's and Garrick's reworkings and the German naturalization of Shakespeare.

Jess-Cooke's study defines 'adaptation' exclusively with regard to film, yet this somewhat narrow perspective can be explained by the choice of subject (Shakespeare films): 'Adaptation is a blanket term for the process by which a text is visualised on screen' (34). The author cites various adaptation nomenclatures (for example, Andrew 1984 and Jorgens 1991) and theories when providing two elaborate case studies of textuality and authorship – working with the concept of the director in the role of author-as-reader – in the 'Adaptation' chapter: *Prospero's Books* (Greenaway, 1991) and *The King Is Alive* (Levring, 2000). Here Jess-Cooke selects radical examples of adaptation rather than instances aiming to be particularly close to their 'sources', very much in keeping with how Jorgens conceived of adaptation: 'the film uses the text as the starting point for something quite different' (1991 cited in Jess-Cooke 35).

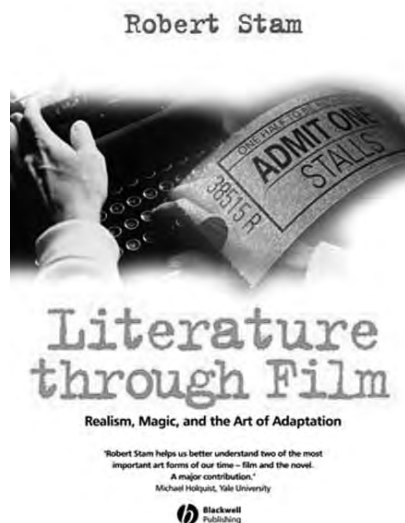
The recurrent use of the term 'meaning' could be more refined, with some reflection on its contested nature. Phrases such as 'search for meaning' (100) and 'creat[ing]' and 'reproduc[ing]' meaning (100) could be placed in a firmer theoretical context, and a distinction between 'meaning' and 'interpretation' could have been made, especially since the two concepts at times occur within the same sentence or paragraph, without much differentiation between them: 'Will new interpretations and meanings replace the original?' (46).

Apart from being an inspirational and well-researched teaching aid, Carolyn Jess-Cooke's work also sets the standard for fellow researchers in terms of clarity of film terminology and attention to detail in case studies. A broad range of material is handled rather evenly, not in the least by adopting the vision of a cultural critic, apart from the dominant perspective of the film specialist. Some sharp critical observations are made when looking at a shape-shifting and multifunctional Shakespeare as 'national property' (87), 'a global icon of literacy, intertextuality and culture' (84), 'a globally-recognisable framework' (88) of 'cultural experience' (9), a 'global conglomerate and franchise' (9), 'an authenticating agent' (90), 'a symbol of cultural legitimacy' (90) and, last but not least, 'a cultural text with many ghosts and shades' (101).

Even though it is structure-orientated film studies discourse that dominates the book, the author does not neglect other crucial factors that contribute to the making and receiving of Shakespeare films, such as ideology, the cultural, historical and social context, and issues of gender and race, among others. The monograph is far from suggesting that an exclusively formalist attitude to filmic Shakespeares is the way forward in the field. Yet, Jess-Cooke's work highlights the importance of carrying out close readings of Shakespeare films with the aid of film vocabularies, and this is something many literature, drama and cultural studies experts dabbling in Shakespearean film studies could take into consideration.

***Literature Through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation*, Robert Stam (2005), First edition**
Oxford: Blackwell, 388 pp., ISBN 1405102888,
Paperback, £17.99, ISBN 140510287X, Hardback, £60.

Reviewed by **Benjamin Poore**, Royal Holloway, University of London
E-mail: B.Poore@rhul.ac.uk



This book is part of a three-volume series on literature and film adaptation which promises to be a very useful resource for students and teachers of the adaptation process. *Literature through Film* is the single-authored work of the series, where Robert Stam sets out his view of the relationships between film and literature. Its accessible, lively prose and clear structure and design, make the reading experience a happy one. I learnt a great deal about film history and gained some fresh insights on literature I thought I knew. Some of Stam's salient points are that the 'original' is never really an original, that all adaptations themselves have a cultural context, and

that literature and film have the potential to illuminate each other. These ideas are eloquently demonstrated many times over in the book, and clearly have further applications to areas such as television and theatre adaptation.

Stam starts from the proposition that *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe*, as two early novels, exemplify two contrasting modes in prose fiction (and later film): the playful, magical and self-conscious style of Cervantes, and the supposedly transparent, documentary approach of Defoe's narrative. Each chapter begins with a consideration of a literary landmark or innovation, whether it concerns Fielding, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, the *cine-roman* or the Latin American 'boom' novelists. Stam introduces these texts and runs through some critical perspectives on them in the inspiring, provocative manner of the best kind of lecturer on literature. He examines how the novels work, with particular reference to issues for film-makers. Selected adaptations of the works are analysed, and Stam then opens his chapters out to the 'intertexts' and 'post-texts' of the novels, exploring films, stories and television shows whose makers may not admit (or even realize) that they are adaptations of these literary or stylistic archetypes.

The book is dedicated to Edward Said, and it is not difficult to see the connections between Said's work and Stam's declared aims here, where 'provincial and Eurocentric' (8) views of the novel are challenged. Stam

takes as read Said's argument that Western literature served the interests of colonialism. He asserts: 'The various European empires embodied themselves and projected their power through texts, not only through political treatises... but also through novels and, later, films' (16). Of course, some would say that such an argument, in practice, has expansionist tendencies of its own, defining works of the European canon like *Mansfield Park* and *Jane Eyre* by their relationship to colonialism, and then finding them guilty by association with the imperialist project.

Proponents of this latter view are perhaps more likely to notice a certain arbitrariness in Stam's method. In the introduction, he explains why we can no longer sustain essentialist assumptions about fidelity, genre, realism, high and low culture, and the European literary tradition. Stam goes on to describe his own theoretical approach thus: 'Deploying simultaneously literary theory, media theory, and (multi)cultural studies, I will deploy multiple grids – a kind of methodological cubism' (20). Sometimes this is enlightening, as when he brings Brecht into discussions of the French New Wave (259), or when he considers the wider context and stylistic origins of *Don Quixote* (25–29). However, on other occasions, Stam's 'multiple grids' seem to consist of a deficit-model approach, where films are judged for failing to live up to enlightened twenty-first century standards. In the *Robinson Crusoe* chapter, for instance, Stam finds Buñuel's 1954 film adaptation 'disappointingly acquiescent in the racism and imperialist conventions that undergird Defoe's novel' (80) despite the film's 'critical glimpses of Crusoe the colonialist' and his 'genocidal rage' (81), and the indications of Crusoe's mental instability (82). The 1975 adaptation *Man Friday*, on the other hand, is criticized for its clichéd positive stereotypes of black people, while its more complex representation of Friday contributes to 'an exercise in white narcissism' (91). Similarly, a 1996 adaptation merely 'makes token gestures toward a shallow political correctness' (97). It seems that even when adaptations are more subversive or thoughtful, they fail to be so in quite the right way.

A similar censoriousness surfaces in the discussion of sexism in Tony Richardson's 1963 *Tom Jones* film (118). Stam often reminds us of the importance of the context of the individual novel, but sometimes affords less understanding to the film's own sociocultural milieu. Is it worth considering the contemporary forces that made it almost inevitable that an early-1960s British adaptation of *Tom Jones* would be harshly sexist in modern terms? Part of the problem may lie with the book's format. Although it is described on the cover as a text book, there are no lists of questions or points for discussion; Stam provides a point of view or judgement on everything, rather than setting up the debate. The cumulative effect, as he lists the shortcomings of another film adaptation, is that one ends up wondering if there is any adaptation whose politics or directorial choice do pass muster. This tends to make film seem to be always falling short of satisfactorily realizing the novel's complexity, which I am sure is not Stam's intention.

Nevertheless, this volume's clear-sighted analysis of the problematics of realism, the range of adaptation practice, and the particularities of film and literature, mean that it more than succeeds on its own terms. I can

imagine *Literature through Film* functioning very well as a core text for a taught Masters course. Meanwhile, undergraduate students of (particularly Hispanic and Lusophone) film and literature will find rich pickings in the critiques of individual works. Moreover, researchers who would like an absorbing – and occasionally provoking – introduction to the possibilities of adapting literature to film, and want to broaden their knowledge of world cinema and literature at the same time, are advised to enjoy this work from cover to cover.

Journal of
Adaptation in Film & Performance
Volume 1 Number 2 – 2008

83–85 **Editorial**

Richard Hand and Katja Krebs

Articles

- 87–101 'Are There Any More at Home Like You?': Rewiring *Superman*
Richard Berger
- 103–116 *Ran*: Chaos on the 'Western' Frontier
Yvonne Griggs
- 117–132 Displacing the Gods? Agency and Power in Adaptations of Ancient History and Myth
Stuart Price
- 133–145 Mass-Market Comedy: How Mel Brooks Adapted *The Producers* for Broadway,
and Made a Billion Dollars 2001– 2007
Alex Symons
-

Practitioners' Perspectives

- 147–159 Researching the Method: Some Personal Strategies
Michael Fry
-

161–170 **Reviews**

ISSN 1753-6421

